

From Insight to Impact: Leading on Opportunity

Advancing Economic Mobility in Charlotte, 2014-2026





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Current Leadership



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Dr. Sharon Gaber
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Council Emeritus

Dee O'Dell

Dr. Ophelia Garmon-Brown
(in memorium)

Current Funders & Supporters



Corporate Donors



Individual Donors

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Kristin & Buck Bradberry	Devonya Govan-Hunt	Deborah Steele
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From Our Executive Director



In 2014, our city was forced to confront a difficult truth. A national study revealed that Charlotte ranked last among the 50 largest U.S. cities for economic mobility, meaning a child born into poverty here had fewer chances to rise than almost anywhere else in the country.

That study examined the economic outcomes of more than 40 million children born primarily between 1978-1983 and linked them to their parents' income through federal tax records. In response, Foundation for the Carolinas assembled the Opportunity Task Force, which brought together civic leaders, residents, educators, clergy, employers, nonprofits, and public institutions to ask a fundamental question: What would it take to make Charlotte a place where every child has a real opportunity to thrive? From that call to action (and the comprehensive Task Force Report), abundant hard conversations, and self-examination as a community, Leading on Opportunity was born.

The police-involved shooting of Keith Lamont Scott in 2016 — and the protests that followed — made Charlotte's inequality visible and visceral. The unrest exposed deep, long-standing racial and economic divides that had been simmering beneath the city's growth narrative. In that moment, Charlotte civic leaders named the impact of segregation, and seized the opportunity to deal with inequality head-on. The level-setting task force work in the early days, led by Dee O'Dell and the late Dr. Ophelia Garmon-Brown, set the bar for the challenge ahead. As the inaugural executive director of Leading on Opportunity, Dr. Stephanie Cooper-Lewter shouldered the herculean task of catalyzing meaningful progress across the systems that shape opportunity in Charlotte.

Since 2017, our role as an initiative hasn't always been clear or without challenges, but has remained ambitious: to bring people together, align strategies, and ensure that Charlotte's response to the challenge of economic mobility is informed by data, driven by community voices, and sustained through collective action.

Over the past nine years, Charlotte-Mecklenburg has collectively moved more than \$1 billion to economic mobility through public investment and philanthropic support. In concert with partners across the community, Leading on Opportunity has advanced a shared framework for improving economic mobility, one that focuses on early care and education, child and family stability, college and career readiness, the impact of segregation, and social capital.

Perhaps most importantly, economic mobility has become deeply integrated into the region's institutions.

In 2022, Leading on Opportunity launched The Opportunity Compass, a flagship data tool created in partnership with the Charlotte Executive Leadership Council. The Compass measures more than 80 indicators of economic mobility, matches these metrics with the strategies of more than 100 nonprofits, and tracks how \$50 million in public and private investments are moving the needle. It has become a national model for groups building coalitions around economic mobility.

In 2024, Charlotte was again in the spotlight as another study showed improvement – moving from No. 50 to 38 in economic mobility. Charlotte ranked No. 3 out of 50 on economic mobility progress, moving upward faster than peer cities. In addition, Mecklenburg was the only county in the country of the top 50 where low-income white children experienced no decline in economic mobility, demonstrating that progress is not a zero-sum game. The 2024 release expanded the dataset substantially, using information on approximately 57 million children and measuring changes in mobility over time. Instead of looking at a single generation, researchers compared children born in 1978 with those born in 1992.

The landscape for economic mobility work remains vital, but is changing locally and nationally. Priorities have shifted to immediate community needs like transportation, public safety, and food insecurity. And many organizations have reduced funding for economic mobility.

Leading on Opportunity will sunset as an initiative in June 2026. This transition reflects an important milestone: The work of advancing economic mobility in Charlotte is no longer owned by a single initiative. It has become embedded across institutions, public policy, philanthropy, and community leadership throughout the region. While our chapter as an organization is coming to a close, the mission that brought us together remains as urgent and as possible as ever.

Charlotte's future depends on whether we continue to work collectively to ensure that every child, regardless of where they are born, has a pathway to opportunity. To the residents, advocates, funders, policymakers, educators, employers, and community leaders who have been part of this journey — thank you. Your commitment has helped move Charlotte forward.

The work continues, and the responsibility belongs to all of us.

With gratitude,

Sherri Chisholm
Executive Director
Leading on Opportunity

From Dr. Raj Chetty



More than a decade ago, our research at Opportunity Insights found that children born into low-income families in Charlotte had the lowest rates of upward mobility among America's 50 largest cities. Charlotte responded with a deliberate, wide-ranging effort that brought together business leaders, nonprofits, and government, and led to the formation of a commission focused on improving opportunity.

These efforts led to the creation of the Leading on Opportunity initiative, along with a range of investments in early childhood, education, and workforce development, as well as changes in local policy. In more recent research, we find that economic mobility in Charlotte has improved and is now rising faster than in many other large U.S. cities.

These patterns suggest that mobility can change over time, particularly when communities make sustained, cross-sector investments.

Charlotte's progress reflects not a single program, but a broader set of institutional changes: expanded early childhood supports, stronger workforce pathways, increased attention to housing and transportation, and more consistent use of data to track outcomes. This approach has also contributed to growing national interest in place-based strategies to increase opportunity. Several cities—including Philadelphia, St. Louis, Richmond, and Atlanta—are developing related efforts to improve economic mobility, drawing in part on lessons from Charlotte's Leading on Opportunity initiative.

At the same time, the work is not complete. Economic mobility outcomes typically change gradually and require sustained investment over long periods. Continued progress in Charlotte will depend on extending what has been effective, strengthening neighborhood-level opportunity, and maintaining a focus on children and families in policy decisions.

Charlotte's experience illustrates that local action, informed by data and sustained over time, can be associated with meaningful improvements in economic opportunity. Building on this progress will require continued commitment in the years ahead.

Sincerely,

Dr. Raj Chetty
Professor of Economics, Harvard University
Director of Opportunity Insights



Dr. Chetty highlighted Charlotte’s progress in a New York Times Op-Ed, “after Charlotte’s 50th out of 50 ranking, the city responded... Charlotte is now among the cities in which economic mobility is rising most quickly in America, demonstrating that opportunity can change. Imagine a similar focus on creating an opportunity economy, but nationally.”

Since the inception of Leading on Opportunity in 2017, Charlotte-Mecklenburg has moved more than \$1 billion to economic mobility through public investment and philanthropic support. The most significant commitments have been to affordable housing, early education, workforce development, and racial equity.

Leading on Opportunity has fundamentally changed the way the community approaches large-scale problems. The initiative created a shared language for collaborative action, inspired the structure and priorities of the Charlotte Executive Leadership Council (CELC), enabled the creation of more than 5,000 affordable housing units, laid the systemic groundwork for Charlotte’s 2040 Comprehensive Plan, and aligned the budgets of the city, county, school system, United Way, Inlivan, Charlotte Works, as well as scores of nonprofits.

By creating a shared language and definition through data and the Opportunity Compass, Leading on Opportunity built one of the only data tools in the nation to measure Social Capital, and its four drivers (Access to Opportunity, Collective Flourishing, Strong Communities, Supportive Neighbors).

Early in the planning process the City created the Charlotte Equity Atlas, which looks at the city through a lens of equity and inclusion. This document built upon the past work of the Opportunity Insights Team, the Leading on Opportunity Report, the Mecklenburg Quality of Life Explorer, and the Housing & Homelessness Dashboard.

The mapping of the development, environmental, and demographic patterns across the city helped identify areas of disparity and establish a baseline to better understand the real-world results left by our inequitable system.



Catalyzed by Dr. Raj Chetty’s seismic 2014 Opportunity Insights study ranking Charlotte last among the 50 largest U.S. cities, and Mecklenburg No. 99 of 100 counties in upward mobility, Leading on Opportunity focused on facilitating change through the use of strategy, policy, and data. The initiative, housed at Foundation for the Carolinas, has since been advocating for and tracking systemic change and progress in Charlotte that often goes unseen by the public, but not unfelt.

The spotlight was again on Charlotte in 2024, as another Opportunity Insights/Chetty study showed improvement – Charlotte moved from No. 50 to 38 in economic mobility (the ability of children from low-income families to climb the income ladder and thrive). Charlotte ranked No. 3 out of 50 on economic mobility progress, moving upward faster than peer cities. In addition, Mecklenburg is the only county in the country where low-income white children experienced no decline in economic mobility.

The landscape for economic mobility work remains vital, but is changing. Priorities have shifted to immediate community needs like transportation, public safety, and food insecurity. And many organizations moved to single year and/or reduced funding for economic mobility.

While this chapter is ending for Leading on Opportunity, the work of economic mobility continues in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Leading on Opportunity is proud of the role it has played in moving it forward. Examples of success are legion, and include:



Mecklenburg County Manager Mike Bryant created two leadership roles focused on improving upward mobility and helping all residents rise economically. Dr. Virginia Covill, Leading on Opportunity Deputy Director of Strategy and Operations, joined the county as Assistant County Manager, focused on workforce development and upward mobility, in January 2026.



Leading on Opportunity played a key role in the passage of a 1-cent sales tax increase in Mecklenburg County for a 30-year transit plan, expected to generate an estimated \$19.4 billion to fund improvements to public transportation, including new rail lines and expanded bus services.



Since 2018, United Way of Greater Charlotte has invested nearly \$51 million in community groups working on housing stability, food security, and poverty reduction — all critical components of economic opportunity.



The Mayor’s Racial Equity Initiative directed \$250 million to economic mobility, which includes funding for Johnson C. Smith University to produce equitable access, opportunities, and outcomes for Charlotte’s communities of color while transforming JCSU into a top-tier, career-focused HBCU.



The Charlotte Executive Leadership Council’s Executives in Residence program with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has placed more than 30 companies and organizations in schools through loaned executives, financial contributions, and other support.



Since inception in 2018, the Charlotte Housing Opportunity Investment Fund has invested nearly \$50 million in public-private deals to create or preserve more than 1,900 units of affordable housing. In addition, Charlotte voters approved continuous increases totalling \$100 million in affordable housing and support of the Housing Trust Fund.



Since 2017, Mecklenburg County’s \$162.75 million commitment to Universal Pre-K (all 4-year-olds) now serves 115 classrooms and 2,070 four-year-olds at no cost to their families. In addition to MECK Pre-K funding, since 2024 the County has invested \$3.6 million in NC Pre-K through 2026.

Why Economic Mobility Matters in Charlotte

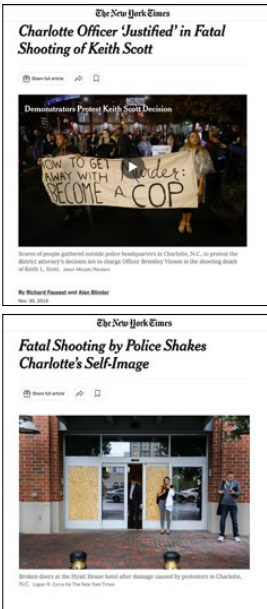


Charlotte in 2014 was all gas, no brakes: construction cranes filled the sky over Uptown, millennials streamed into the city, driving the demand for breweries, craft cocktails and hot yoga. The Carolina Panthers were a year away from a Super Bowl run, and the Charlotte Knights had just moved into Truist Field near Romare Bearden Park. The city was still basking in the international glow from successfully hosting the Democratic National Convention two years prior. Charlotte was a prosperous, thriving city on the rise.

So in that same year when Dr. Raj Chetty of Harvard University's Opportunity Insights published the study *Where is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States*, which ranked Charlotte last among the 50 largest US cities, and Mecklenburg No. 99 out of 100 counties in upward mobility, the reaction in the city was seismic. It was a wake-up call for some, and an overdue acknowledgement for others.

Before that study was published, a New York Times article forecasting the research outcomes caught the attention of Brian Collier, then-Executive Vice President of Foundation for the Carolinas (FFTC), one of the largest community foundations in the United States.

Collier presented the Times story to Michael Marsicano, then-president and CEO of FFTC and the board of directors. The group decided to pause a \$2 million portion of the foundation's grant-making to study the issues further. In 2015, the foundation teamed up with Charlotte and Mecklenburg County officials to examine the Chetty research, which led to the convening of The Opportunity Task Force. Twenty community members spent 18 months focused on intergenerational poverty and its negative impact on the life trajectory of many of Charlotte-Mecklenburg's children and youth.



"People's eyes glaze over when you talk about poverty. [But] everyone is shocked when you think about the American Dream and how the place where you were born dictates so heavily your pathway. No matter what you think about poverty and income redistribution and all of the different things people talk about, every person in the United States agrees that people should have a fair shot at achieving the American Dream," Collier said in an interview with the Stanford University Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIEPR).

In the meantime, the city received a catalytic spark in a most painful way: the police shooting of Keith Lamont Scott in Charlotte on Sept. 20, 2016, and the protests that paralyzed the city in the subsequent days. It became a civic wake-up call for corporate, philanthropic, and government leaders to address the root causes of inequality.

The days following the shooting prompted a state of emergency, curfews and deployment of the National Guard. It forced a broader conversation about structural inequality. The embodiment of that No. 50 ranking was laid bare for the world to see.

"There are immediate actions we can take ... but this is a marathon, not a sprint. When I connect a friend's child to a job opportunity, I am using my social capital for their benefit. If we are willing to utilize our social capital and begin to connect others to knowledge, access and opportunity, we can have dramatic positive impact on these three (areas)."

Dee O'Dell, Task Force Co-Chair
On the impact of segregation on early childhood care and education, college and career readiness, and family and child stability in 2017

The protests reflected deeper frustration about:

- Persistent racial disparities
- Segregated neighborhoods and schools
- Limited access to opportunity in certain corridors of the city

While the incident itself was about policing, the community response quickly widened to systemic issues, including housing segregation, education inequality, workforce access, and wealth gaps. Those broader concerns accelerated Charlotte's economic mobility agenda.

The Keith Lamont Scott shooting forced the region to confront how economic growth and inequality were unfolding simultaneously. The protests turned what had been a data problem into a moral, civic, and political urgency, pushing institutions, funders, and policymakers to invest more intentionally in opportunity and equity.

Charlotte didn't lack goodwill, it lacked alignment.

The Task Force, established by Foundation for the Carolinas and guided by civic leaders Dee O'Dell and Dr. Ophelia Garmon-Brown, articulated two truths: Charlotte is a thriving, opportunity-rich community (the second-largest banking center in the United States), and that shiny prosperity is reflective of the lived experience of only a segment of the population.

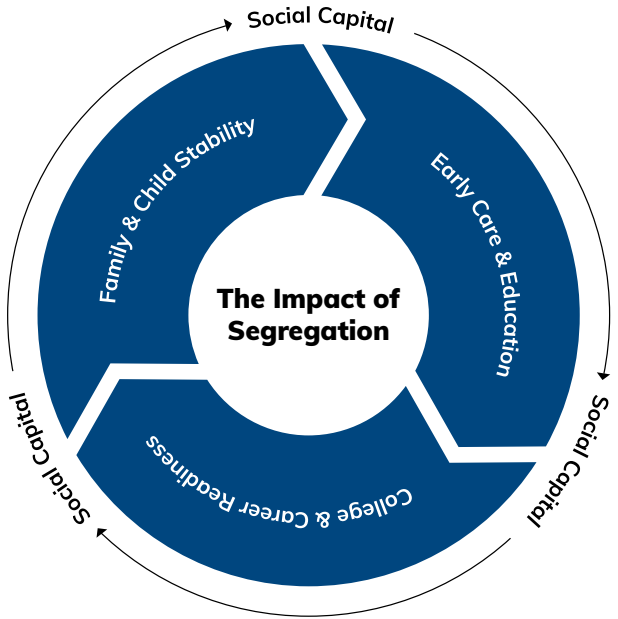
The Task Force worked with more than 50 national, regional and local experts, as well as thousands of community members to better understand the myriad complex issues that impact generational poverty and access to opportunity. In its final report (issued in March 2017), it narrowed its focus to three interrelated determinants and two cross-cutting factors that are most likely to have the greatest influence on an individual's opportunity trajectory:

- Early Care & Education
- Child & Family Stability
- College & Career Readiness
- Impact of Segregation
- Social Capital

These are omnipresent factors with profound impact on economic opportunity, social mobility, and general quality of life.

Among the Task Force Report recommendations was the creation of an initiative to provide leadership and dedicated staff to provide day-to-day support for the work going forward.

With Dr. Stephanie Cooper-Lewter as Executive Director, Leading on Opportunity was launched in 2017 to convene leaders and build narrative work, translating national insights into local impact.



Leaders felt good about championing an initiative, funding a staff, and were ready to see results -- the sooner, the better.

But there was a fundamental unfamiliarity about the work Leading on Opportunity set out to do. Unlike unemployment rates or crime statistics, economic mobility is measured through generational data (such as income changes, neighborhood opportunity indexes, educational attainment trajectories) — generally considered to be 20 to 30 years — representing the average time between the birth of parents and the birth of their offspring.

Because it is dense, technical and slow-moving, it's harder to translate into simple narratives that galvanize public engagement. But the unique thing about economic mobility is the findings are also intuitive, so you're working with data that move on a generational time horizon and experiences that are very real and present today.

Economic mobility matters in Charlotte because the city's future depends on whether prosperity is broadly shared. If more residents can access opportunity, Charlotte doesn't just grow, it becomes stronger, more stable, and more competitive.



Are you going to do better than your parents? It's a 50-50 chance, whereas if you were born in the 1940s or 1950s, [you had] more than a 90 percent chance you were going to do better than your parents. So basically almost a guarantee for most kids that you were going to achieve the American Dream of doing better than your parents did. Today, that's certainly no longer the case."

Dr. Raj Chetty

Growth of the region has been accelerating since the 1960s, and Charlotte is a city that fundamentally believes starting points don't predetermine outcomes, that mobility is about breaking cycles, not just easing symptoms. When mobility stalls, disadvantage compounds across generations, apparent through education, income, health — opportunity — gaps.

Investing in economic mobility also shores up Charlotte's ability to maintain that robust business growth, through workforce development of a strong, skilled labor pool. That leads to economic expansion, more customers, more entrepreneurs, a stronger tax base, and an increased reputation for the region as a desirable destination for business.



Economic Mobility Through the Decades

1967

I-77 Construction

The location of the highway in Mecklenburg County reinforced and strengthened the racial divisions and economic stagnation put in place by federal redlining maps from the 1930s.

1960s - 70s

Urban Renewal Destroys Brooklyn/ Historic Second Ward

The Brooklyn neighborhood was razed in Charlotte's first wave of "urban renewal," displacing thousands of Black residents and demolishing more than 1,480 structures.

Pictured at right
2nd Street, Brooklyn neighborhood



1971

Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education

The U.S. Supreme Court cites the 14th Amendment, permits the systematic use of buses to convey children of different races across district lines to further the goal of integrating public schools.

Pictured at right
Dorothy Counts-Scoggins getting escorted out of Harding High School in 1957



1975

Textiles Mill Closures

When the Johnston Mill closed in 1975, it was one of the last of Charlotte's major textile mills, having opened in 1916 in NoDa. The shuttering of textile mills marked the transition of Charlotte from a primarily blue collar to college educated town.

1977

District Representation on City Council

The Black Political Caucus, the Woman's Political Caucus, and community organizers were instrumental in the adoption of Charlotte's district representation system, which opens city council to minorities.

Pictured at right
Elizabeth Randolph, Black Political Caucus



1977

Community Reinvestment Act

Enacted by Congress to encourage deposit-taking banks to reinvest in the communities where they operate to begin to counteract the effects of redlining.

1978

Launch of Charlotte Center City Partners

Created to ensure Charlotte Center City is welcoming and equitable, economically vibrant, culturally rich, inclusive, memorable, sustainable, resilient, and beloved.

1980s - 90s

Charlotte's Economic Boom

The city's growth increased rapidly as interstate banking regulations were lifted and corporate headquarters relocated to Charlotte, and the airport expanded significantly.

1983

Charlotte Elects First Black Mayor

Harvey Gantt, who served on Charlotte City Council for nine years, was elected to two terms as the first African-American mayor of Charlotte, serving 1983-87.

Pictured at right
Harvey Gantt as a student at Clemson University in 1964



1983

Banking Moves

Hugh McCall becomes CEO of North Carolina National Bank, setting in motion the creation of NationsBank and eventually Bank of America in 1998, which he led until his retirement in 2001.

1985 - 87

Transportation Planning, Corrective Zoning and Growth

Charlotte and Mecklenburg County approved the 2005 Land Use and Transportation Plan, which set in motion the idea of light rail corridors and the wedges in between. Little consideration was given for the community social and economic dynamics, instead prioritizing land development and transportation.

1990s

Debut of City within a City

The City Within a City program encompassed community capacity building, housing and infrastructure development, human development, organizational development and community safety to increase inner city residents' access to the quality of life enjoyed by the city's more prosperous sectors.

1990

Mobilizing the Latin American Community

The Latin American Coalition — the oldest and largest immigrant community-based organization in the region — is one of many organizations coalescing Hispanics, immigrants and allies to promote the full and equal participation of all people in the civic, economic and cultural life of North Carolina through integration, education, celebration and advocacy.

1993

Hope VI Program

The federal government-led public housing revitalization aimed to build up mixed-income neighborhoods and offer community education. Met with mixed results in 11 sites across Charlotte. Renaissance West is an example of success. While the outcomes were positive, the program displaced many in the process.

1994

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act

The federal legislation set out to increase coordination among federal workforce development and related programs. Locally, that resulted in Charlotte's first Joblink Center, managed by Charlotte Works, addressing training and job needs of lower income residents.



1995

Charlotte lands NFL franchise

Civic leaders efforts to elevate the profile of Charlotte scored a win when the NFL awarded a franchise to the city, making the Carolina Panthers the second professional sports team, joining the NBA's Charlotte Hornets.

1997

Textile Mill Plant Closures

Approximately 100,000 jobs were lost in textiles in North Carolina from 1997 to 2002, with an additional 70,000 lost in the apparel industry during that same period.

1999

Supreme Court Ends Bussing in CMS

The school system that pioneered busing for desegregation three decades ago was ordered to halt the program by a Federal judge who ruled that forced integration was no longer necessary because all vestiges of intentional discrimination had disappeared.

2000

CMS Task Force

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education convenes a citizens task force to make recommendations on the new student assignment plan, focused on giving families a chance to choose a school close to home; preserving the integrity of choice; addressing growth in a reasonable way and offering stability through K-12 feeder patterns.

2001

Crossroads Charlotte

Crossroads Charlotte focused on access, equity and inclusion primarily through organizational change. The effort, which led to diverse projects across the region, ignited a larger conversation about Charlotte's future.

Pictured at right
Crossroads Charlotte Learning Network event



2001

The Housing Trust Fund

Established by Charlotte City Council to provide financing to developers for affordable housing through voter-approved housing bonds. As of December 2021, the City of Charlotte has allocated \$218.8 million from the Housing Trust Fund to go toward affordable housing.

2003

Workforce Transition Plan

In response to the Pillowtex plant closure in Kannapolis that eliminated 4,000 jobs, North Carolina requested a National Emergency Grant (NEG) totaling \$20.6 million for employment transition related services including \$2.5 million for the North Carolina Community College System to build capacity to handle the influx of laid off workers.

Pictured at right
Senrats, Cannon Mills, Co. Plant 1 Kannapolis, NC



2004

United Agenda for Children

Foundation for the Carolinas and Lee Institute convened government, corporate and nonprofit partners to establish service priorities for children in Mecklenburg County in health, safety and education. The program served as a springboard for other related programs serving children and youth.

2007

African-American Agenda (CM3A)

More than 1,000 people attended the Charlotte-Mecklenburg African American Agenda (CM3A) meeting to look at ways to narrow racial gaps. Ten "covenants" for education, health and equal opportunity.

2008

Great Recession Impact on Nonprofits

Foundation for the Carolinas convened funders to strategize about the recession's impact on the nonprofit community, eventually leading to the creation of the Critical Needs Fund and the Catalyst Fund.

2010

Housing Advisory Board

For the first time, The city of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County created a joint body to advise on affordable housing. The community-based board appointed was tasked with the implementation of the 10-Year Plan to End and Prevent Homelessness and served as the governing board for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Continuum of Care.

2011

Project LIFT

Project LIFT was among efforts aimed at improving outcomes in Charlotte's low-performing public schools. However, its lack of efficacy showed that the combination of goodwill, enthusiasm, dollars, and civic pride couldn't effectively combat resegregation of schools and the economic fragmentation that accompanies it.

2013

Airport Expansion, American Airlines Merger

Charlotte's airport expanded significantly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, adding terminals and becoming a hub for Piedmont Airlines and US Airways. In 2013, American Airlines merged with US Airways which resulted in the creation of the largest airline in the United States, and ultimately the world.

2014

50 out of 50

"Land of Opportunity" study released by Dr. Raj Chetty of Harvard University, ranking Charlotte last among the 50 largest US cities, and Mecklenburg No. 99 out of 100 counties in upward mobility. It was a wake-up call for some, and an overdue acknowledgement for others.

2015

Charlotte Executive Leadership Council

Designed to be as nimble as possible, the council was created as an organized group of C-Suite leaders with a relatively small budget that was held in a fund at Foundation for the Carolinas. Membership includes CEOs of some of Charlotte's largest companies, along with presidents of universities and colleges, as well as respected leaders from smaller businesses to ensure diverse perspectives.

2015

Economic Opportunity Task Force

In response to the seismic "Chetty" study, Charlotte dives into the bigger macro issues facing Charlotte, which results in the creation of the Economic Opportunity Task Force.

Pictured at right
Economic Opportunity Task Force meeting in 2015



2016

Fatal Shooting of Keith Lamont Scott

The fatal shooting of Keith Lamont Scott by a Charlotte-Mecklenburg police officer set off days of protests in the city; acting as a loud, sometimes violent reminder of racial and economic inequality.

2017

Leading on Opportunity

Among the outcomes of the Economic Opportunity Task Force is the creation of Leading on Opportunity, an organization focused on facilitating change through the use of strategy, policy and data. Since its debut, the organization has been advocating for and tracking the progress in Charlotte that is often not readily available to the public.

2018

Universal Pre-Kindergarten

Mecklenburg County commissioners agreed to spend millions of dollars on a six-year plan for universal pre-kindergarten — eventually open to anyone who wants to take part.

2019

Local Initiatives Support Corp. opens Charlotte Office

The national non-profit community development financial institution opened its 33rd program office in Charlotte as part of an effort to expand affordable housing, businesses, and jobs across the region.

2020

COVID-19 Response Fund

Foundation for the Carolinas and the United Way of Greater Charlotte led the effort to distribute more than \$23.5 million to 240 nonprofits helping those affected by the pandemic with basic needs such as childcare, education, housing, food, emergency financial assistance, legal advocacy, health and mental health, and workforce development.



2021

Mayor's Racial Equality Initiative

Charlotte Mayor Vi Lyles announced a \$250M initiative to help bridge the digital divide, invest in corridors of opportunity, help transform Johnson C. Smith University, and recruit and advance people of color in business, specifically C-suits.

2021

2040 Comprehensive Plan

The policy document details Charlotte's long-term vision and goals and outlines the steps necessary to achieve them. It will be used to inform ordinances like the Unified Development Ordinance, inform housing decisions, and shape land development decisions and future community investment plans.

2022

Opportunity Compass Debuts

Leading on Opportunity launched a tool designed to create clarity out of complexity by centering the key drivers of economic mobility, sharing community data and most powerfully — aligning programs and investments to these common metrics. More than 100 English and Spanish-speaking Charlotte-area nonprofits have learned how to use the Compass to report impact, tell their story, and plan for the future.



2024

Updated Chetty Study

Opportunity Insights, the Harvard University-based research group led by Dr. Raj Chetty, publishes Changing Opportunity: Sociological Mechanisms Underlying Growing Class Gaps and Shrinking Race Gaps in Economic Mobility, which shows Charlotte moved from No. 50 to 38 in economic mobility, and is ranked No. 3 out of 50 on economic mobility progress, moving upward faster than peer cities. Mecklenburg is the only county in the country where low-income white children experienced no decline in economic mobility.

Role of Leading on Opportunity: Backbone, Connector & Catalyst



The Opportunity Task Force Report was intended to be a living document offering 21 strategies, multiple recommendations and dozens of tactics to improve upward mobility. Key among those strategies was establishing an initiative to quarterback these efforts.

Charlotte is a city that in many ways has and continues to be ahead in its approach to community progress. Collectively, the city refused to accept its low ranking, and made a commitment to improve lives in Charlotte. Charlotte is fortunate to have City and County leaders who have made very intentional investments in data (for example, the Quality of Life Explorer). Charlotte has a thriving corporate sector that is attracting and recruiting employees that are interested in data. There are numerous colleges and universities with ample student and faculty talent.

What was missing was a central entity translating existing data into meaningful insights, and more importantly, action for local leaders. That was the sweet spot for Leading on Opportunity: applying structure and accountability to that momentum.

Leading on Opportunity was created in 2017 as an initiative of the Foundation for the Carolinas, to maintain Charlotte's commitment and maintain momentum toward progress in economic mobility. Leading on Opportunity has since been advocating for and tracking the progress in Charlotte that is often not readily available to the public through data, strategy and policy. It is led by an advisory board of external community and corporate leaders known as the Leading on Opportunity Council. Retired Bank of America executive Andrea Smith and former Teacher of the Year Dr. James Ford were the inaugural co-chairs.

The aim of Leading on Opportunity was to bridge the statistical, data-driven world and that of partners doing the work in the community, building on efforts launched as early as the 1960s, picking up momentum in the 1980s: Charlotte's economic boom, interstate banking, financial headquarters relocations, civic-led response to textile mill closures and prioritizing children's health, safety and education, among others.



The Opportunity Task Force and Leading on Opportunity did not set out to “solve” economic mobility in Charlotte, but reframed the issue, aligned institutions, influenced policy, and built the civic infrastructure needed to tackle it long term.

Leading on Opportunity was truly unique in the Charlotte philanthropic landscape; it was never intended to be a direct service provider or one-off program funder like other well-known nonprofits, like United Way of Greater Charlotte.

That intentionality from the Opportunity Task Force was insightful and innovative (which is now being duplicated in other cities/regions across the country), but unintentionally added a layer of difficulty. Some members of the general public didn't quite know what to make of Leading on Opportunity, and in turn, expected quick, quantifiable results

on a topic that was wide, deep and dense. The organization often looked influential in conversation but less visible in execution.

The early iteration of Leading on Opportunity took the framework outlined by the Task Force and started from there. The report identified three highly interrelated determinants they believe were most likely to have the greatest influence on the opportunity trajectory of an individual:

- Early Care & Education
- College & Career Readiness
- Child & Family Stability

In addition, the Task Force identified two cross-cutting factors with profound impact on economic opportunity, social mobility, and general quality of life. One familiar, and one less so (but Charlotte would come to know the term intimately):

- Impact of Segregation
- Social Capital, or the relationships and networks people have that can connect them to opportunities

In 2018-19, Leading on Opportunity was in its pioneering phase. The team planted seeds for economic mobility work through relationships. Navigating the established and complex Charlotte landscape while managing high expectations wasn't always easy.

Leading on Opportunity increasingly positioned itself as a “backbone” or convening organization rather than a driver of programs. This was the result of unanticipated challenges, including: diffused strategy across many issue areas, partners expecting stronger accountability and project ownership, Leading on Opportunity not controlling funding or policy levers, and key initiatives being owned by other entities (schools, county nonprofits). For funders and civic leaders, this sometimes created the perception that the organization was everywhere and nowhere at once.

While Leading on Opportunity worked on building momentum, the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically reshaped priorities, and civic focus shifted towards emergency response, digital access, workforce disruptions and educational recovery, among other key areas.

But Charlotte wasn't ready to give up on economic mobility. A national search was conducted, and Sherri Chisholm joined the team as executive director in 2020. A champion for opportunity and a veteran of systems-level change in education and nonprofit leadership, Sherri shared her deep commitment to lifting communities through strategic action and human-centered vision with a community wanting action.

The organization entered its execution phase, one that saw a remarkable transformation of the initiative, empowering stakeholders, funders and the community through an intentional blend of strategy, policy and data. The messaging crystalized and started to connect: While a recent study shows Charlotte moved from No. 50 to No. 38, Leading on Opportunity reminded everyone that economic mobility is generational work.

Leading on Opportunity has worked to ensure that each child has the freedom and chance to dream, pursue those dreams and live a purposeful life — without exception. Leading on Opportunity endeavors to unite resources, embolden leaders and ignite civic imagination toward the prosperity of the next generation.

“The Task Force believes the community's greatest leverage for tackling intergenerational poverty and breaking down barriers to economic opportunity will come from focusing on systemic and structural change versus relying upon programmatic intervention.”

Opportunity Task Force Report



Among the organization’s priorities since 2020:

IDENTIFIES THE PROBLEM

Data

Charlotte was once 50 out of 50 in economic mobility, and has improved because of partnerships, economic connectedness, and navigation services. To continue improving local economic mobility, Charlotte needed the ability to track its progress year over year (rather than waiting up to 10 years for a national study). The city wanted to be able to gauge the short-term impact of programs and investments, and built the Opportunity Compass.

Launched in 2022, the Opportunity Compass measured 33 indicators of economic mobility across key areas of improvement: early care and education, college and career readiness, child and family stability and the impact of segregation. Using publicly available data from 2015-19, the Compass establishes Charlotte-Mecklenburg’s baseline for future progress.

Leading on Opportunity is the practical translation of big data, offering the community education and empowerment through data and expertise. Since 2023, Leading on Opportunity has hosted more than 50 hours of workshops with more than 100 nonprofits, and developed funder impact reports for Bank of America, Atrium Health, Ally Financial, and Mecklenburg County. Nonprofits can use data interpreted by Leading on Opportunity to inform their efficacy and strategy.

More than 100 English and Spanish-speaking Charlotte-area nonprofits have learned how to use the Compass to report impact, tell their story, and plan for the future. The Opportunity Compass organizes local economic mobility data that can be used by funders and nonprofits interested in aligning their work to common metrics.

An updated Compass launched in late 2025 displays current nonprofit programs and financial investments that align with each of the local indicators, increasing the measurable indicators to 82. This information will help Charlotte-Mecklenburg to analyze its economic mobility efforts in new ways.

The Compass is a valuable tool in tracking and measuring how Charlotte maintains that positive momentum. It will provide a shared language and accessible visualizations of the determinants of economic mobility to aid organizations and individuals in policymaking, fundraising, and community organizing.

Economic mobility doesn’t change overnight, and the Compass helps the region focus on the work and sustain commitment, by providing a centralized location for economic mobility data.

CATALYZES ACTION AND A PATH FORWARD

Strategy

Leading on Opportunity excelled in bringing together sectors that previously worked separately. Through sheer determination and grit, the small but mighty Leading on Opportunity team convened business leaders, nonprofits, government, philanthropy, and schools, and initiated conversations around the drivers of mobility.

Keeping in mind that coalitions reduce fragmentation, Leading on Opportunity fostered conversations and collaborations among institutions like city and county government, school systems, local foundations, workforce agencies and universities.

This purposeful, strategic approach helped build a shared ecosystem rather than isolated interventions.

CHANGES THE CONDITIONS

Policy

The Opportunity Task Force report mentioned policy 57 times, recommending actions such as addressing historically damaging policies that caused harm to many Charlotteans, urging funding of programmatic design and informed policy decisions, advocacy, and having a voice in development of state and local policy agendas.

Leading on Opportunity is a proxy between organizations across sectors, and it advocates for urban and rural communities to address needed policy interventions for improving economic mobility.

The goal of coalition building and topical targeting is to inform policymakers about how changes to these policies would create better conditions to improve economic mobility. Charlotte’s mobility stagnation is the result of decades of policies and business practices that have led to a widening income gap and segregation.

Leading on Opportunity broadened the perception of advocacy to include grassroots organizations and businesses. Atrium Health, the Charlotte Regional Business Alliance, Mecklenburg County and the town of Davidson are among the entities that included economic mobility barriers in their policy agendas after collaboration with Leading on Opportunity. Leading on Opportunity provided tailored policy analysis to local municipalities to identify successes and opportunities related to their specific priorities. The organization leveraged relationships with the business community and non-profit service providers to identify and advocate for policies to increase workforce opportunities. Priorities included access to housing, childcare and transportation.

Success is Charlotte and Mecklenburg County sharing commitment, aligning resources, and collectively working to improve economic mobility, including:

- The passage of a 1-percent sales tax increase in Mecklenburg County for a 30-year transit plan, expected to generate an estimated \$19.4 billion to fund improvements to public transportation, including new rail lines and expanded bus services.
- The Charlotte Future 2040 Comprehensive Plan reduced barriers to homeownership by allowing duplexes, triplexes and quadruplexes in zones previously designated for single family homes.
- Creation of an anti-displacement framework for neighborhoods.
- Increase of the Housing Trust Fund from \$15 million in mid 2000s to \$100 million in 2024.
- Since 2017, Mecklenburg County’s \$162.75 million commitment to Universal Pre-K (all 4-year-olds) now serves 115 classrooms and 2,070 four-year-olds at no cost to their families. In addition to MECK Pre-K funding, since 2024 the County has invested \$3.6 million in NC Pre-K through 2026.
- The Mayor’s Racial Equity Initiative directed \$250 million to economic mobility, which includes funding for Johnson C. Smith University to produce equitable access, opportunities, and outcomes for Charlotte’s communities of color while transforming JCSU into a top-tier, career-focused HBCU.
- Since 2018, United Way of Greater Charlotte has invested nearly \$51 million in community groups working on housing stability, food security, and poverty reduction — all critical components of economic opportunity.

The three-legged stool of data, strategy, and policy gelled in Charlotte through Leading on Opportunity, and attracted attention and funding from across the country. Charlotte became a national case study for confronting economic mobility challenges. That visibility helped bring resources, ideas and credibility to the effort.

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Before 2014, if you had asked most people in Charlotte to define economic mobility, they would likely have had a hard time doing so. But in the wake of Dr. Raj Chetty’s study of that same year — *Where is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States* — Charlotte became familiar with the term, quickly.

Economic mobility, as framed by Opportunity Insights, Chetty’s Harvard University-based team of researchers and policy analysts, is the ability of individuals or families to improve their economic position over time, especially relative to where they started.

In practice, it means people have a realistic chance to move up the income ladder, build financial stability, and create better opportunities for the next generation.

Chetty’s research and reporting in Charlotte focused on intergenerational mobility, which is movement across generations, or how a child’s economic outcomes compare to those of their parents. Intergenerational mobility varies widely by geography, Chetty’s research shows.

Mobility is shaped by a mix of systems and opportunities, including quality education, access to jobs and workforce pathways, affordable housing in opportunity-rich neighborhoods, access to transportation, digital access, family stability and health, and social capital.

Economic mobility is often seen as a measure of the fairness and functionality of a community. When mobility is high, effort and talent have a greater chance of translating into upward mobility. When it is low, economic outcomes are more likely to be determined by birth circumstances.

The 2014 “Chetty study,” as it has come to be known in Charlotte, illustrated that dichotomy, as the city was generally seen as prosperous and successful, but the lived experience of many showed that wasn’t their truth.

Chetty’s national research put Charlotte on the map, though initially not in a positive way. Chetty’s research used millions of anonymized IRS records to map how likely children born into poverty were to move up the income ladder across different metropolitan areas in the United States.

The study said children born into poverty in Charlotte had about a 4-5 percent chance of reaching the top income quintile as adults. Because the data compared cities nationally, it created a powerful and credible benchmark that captured the attention of Charlotte’s civic leadership.

Civic leaders commissioned deeper local analysis, creating the Opportunity Task Force, and giving leaders from business, philanthropy, government, education, and nonprofits seats at the table. They partnered with local universities and research institutions for local context and data, with the goal of translating national findings into Charlotte-specific insights about why mobility was so limited.

“I think the board (setting) priorities (early childhood development; educational attainment; environmental stewardship; health access; housing insecurity; and workforce development) and helping us get to the things that they that they care about around affordable housing, particularly, we’ve done some really, really, really good work on affordable housing when that was not a space that we were in at all.”

Dena Diorio
Retired Mecklenburg County Manager
On the wins of her 36-year tenure



The collaboration and collective work happening in Charlotte was building one of the more data-driven economic mobility initiatives in the United States. In its successful application for an R1 Carnegie classification for research, University of North Carolina Charlotte lifted up economic mobility research as one of its core specialties.

Another early supporter of economic mobility work was The Gambrell Foundation, which was created in 1988 with a primary focus to transform Charlotte-Mecklenburg into a beacon of economic mobility, human flourishing, and fair living for all.

In 2014, after the release of the Chetty study, The Gambrell Foundation launched the Gambrell Faculty Fellowship at The UNC Charlotte Urban Institute. Since inception, the Gambrell Faculty Fellowship has named 59 faculty Fellows and supported 36 research and creative projects that represent seven University colleges.

Early wins and hard lessons were abundant, in near equal measure. The collective consciousness of Charlotte was raised almost instantaneously, and caused the city to question its identity. The Task Force Report provided collective language and a systemic framing of the issue of economic mobility, whether the community members were just learning about the underlying issues of generational poverty, or had been doing anti-poverty work for decades, or had lived experience.

In 2018, led by then-Mecklenburg County Manager Dena Diorio, the Mecklenburg Board of County

Commissioners approved an increase in the property tax rate, raising more than \$9 million to fund the first year of voluntary, public Pre-K. The increase was the first investment toward voluntary, universal Pre-K for all 4-year-old children in the county. Known as MECK Pre-K, the program provides access to free high-quality public Pre-Kindergarten for eligible Mecklenburg County families. When MECK Pre-K began in 2018, more than 600 4-year-old children were served. With expansion, the initiative will ultimately reach more than 4,900 4-year-old children.

The Leading on Opportunity team observed how things happen in the community when different cultures clash (corporate and nonprofit, for example). How/when/where are they compromising for the sake of moving forward? The team focused on establishing and nurturing relationships, meeting people where they are, and bringing them along for the ride.

The team made a purposeful decision to focus on the invisible work of relationship building before switching to sharing our work in a more public fashion. Among the intentional actions with big impact: Leading on Opportunity staff went to the offices of leaders to meet; set up the Leading on Opportunity offices to be more accessible, in a neighborhood, collaborative environment with ample free parking and proximity to public transit; consulted on data with nonprofits pro-bono throughout the lifecycle of the initiative, building goodwill, expertise and position in the community.





The arrival of Sherri Chisholm in 2020 as the Executive Director of Leading on Opportunity coincided with a clarification of the organization’s role in economic mobility in Charlotte.

Systems leadership was established as the core function of the organization: aligning institutions, policies and investments around economic mobility rather than running direct service programs. That clarity helped partners understand where Leading on Opportunity fit within Charlotte’s broader ecosystem.

The challenge of economic mobility touches nearly every system in Charlotte, especially education, housing, workforce and transportation, to name a few. Leading on Opportunity focused that further to three high-impact areas:

early care and education, college and career readiness and child and family stability, allowing the initiative to move from broad conversation about mobility to specific initiatives and policy agendas.

A key part of the work involved building trust and deepening collaboration among the business community, nonprofits and direct service providers, local government and educational institutions.

Rather than shy away from the national spotlight, in 2020 Leading on Opportunity leaned in, seizing the chance to elevate the narrative about Charlotte and economic mobility. The team became oft-requested speakers at national conferences, and shared freely insights about their strategic approach to systems change, Charlotte’s long-term civic priorities and the importance of shared responsibility across sectors.

While Leading on Opportunity is not a direct service provider, incorporating the community voice, racial equity analysis and grassroots leadership lent a necessary human element to work that can often be academic and abstract. The shift from a purely data-driven diagnosis to one that included lived experience was incredibly powerful.

The work of Leading on Opportunity forced Charlotte to acknowledge the racial dimensions of economic mobility, to say the quiet parts out loud. In Charlotte, the data showed Black and Hispanic children born into poverty faced significantly lower upward mobility than white peers. Historic patterns of segregation, disinvestment and unequal school access shaped opportunity outcomes by neighborhood. Increasing the voices shaping mobility strategies encouraged institutions to consider how policies affect families day-to-day, how systems interact around education, housing and employment, and what practical support families need to succeed.

Community wide progress includes:

Created a shared language for collaborative community action	Dozens of nonprofit, corporate and government institutions adopt the recommendations	City of Charlotte budget aligned to the Task Force Report determinants	Charlotte Works aligns its strategies to the Task Force Report determinants	Charlotte Executive Leadership Council (CELC) adopts economic mobility focus to guide work
Novant Health launches \$7M Michael Jordan Clinic	Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS) moves the bus system to a grid system, which aids upward mobility	United Way of Greater Charlotte restructures its grants program for upward mobility	United Way of Greater Charlotte launches United Neighborhoods a community-led model to create sustained neighborhood change	Advocated and secured Universal Pre-K (all 4-year-olds)
Private sector raised \$6.2M to increase the number of degreed teachers for expanded classrooms	Annual commitment of \$60M made by Mecklenburg County for early care and education progress	RoadtoHire expands its programming to provide more pathways to high-earning careers	The GreenLight Fund brings the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) to Charlotte	Year Up comes to Charlotte to provide career pathways for Opportunity Youth
Atrium Health, Wake Forest Baptist Health and Wake Forest School of Medicine create Innovation District	JM Belk Endowment brings MyFutureNC to Charlotte to increase educational attainment	Latest funding by Mecklenburg County to Charlotte Works for economic mobility focus	Advocated for the passage of two bonds totaling \$100M for child and family stability	Raised \$174M in grants and debt equity for housing contracts
Raised \$26M for A Way Home , now under Foundation for the Carolinas, for rental subsidies, 75% of families were self-sufficient after 2 years	Brought financing and community development expert LISC to Charlotte permanently	Enabled the creation of 5,000 new affordable units	3,100+ units created through Housing Trust Fund expansion	1,500-2,000 units created through Charlotte Opportunity Investment Fund (CHOIF)
Inlivian is using the Task Force Report to inform innovative use of vouchers	The Charlotte Business Alliance and Charlotte Executive Leadership Council respond to Mayor Vi Lyles' call for a city-wide Mayor's Racial Equity Initiative	~\$250M in private sector funding raised to support Mayor's Racial Equity Initiative	Informed Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools reassignment process	Communities in Schools launches the Social Capital Challenge, a city-wide effort to increase social capital among its corporate and community partners
Harvard Opportunity Insights brings its economic mobility research to Charlotte	Brookings Institution conducts in-depth social capital research	FFTC partners with Opportunity Insights for capacity building of Charlotte Urban Institute	Opportunity Insights elevates Charlotte's response as a model economic mobility movement	Leading on Opportunity creates the Opportunity Compass , an economic mobility measurement tool



When discussing economic mobility data, the narrative often tends to focus on projects, goals and KPIs. The gold standard is often the “best metrics,” implying that if a city sets the “right metrics” everything will fall in place.

While individual metrics are somewhat helpful, Leading on Opportunity posited that metrics alone won’t impact economic mobility because change happens too slowly to be meaningfully tracked through general community statistics; the shorter the list of “best metrics” the less we understand the pervasive nature of systemic problems, and systems change organizations cannot control individual ecosystem metrics.

Led by AJ Calhoun, Leading on Opportunity Managing Director, the intended use and functionality of the tool was different from the start. The goal was to build a human-centered data tool that met the needs of foundation and nonprofits, and could be useful and beneficial as they set trajectories for their work. Aaron Randolph of the Carolina Youth Coalition was an early and instrumental advisor, offering insightful feedback on prototypes as early as 2021.

The Opportunity Compass launched in 2022, designed to help the community identify the key drivers of economic mobility, track them over time, and aspirationally align programs and investments to those common metrics.

In collaboration with Deloitte, the Compass underwent an overhaul and debuted an expanded tool in 2025, which tracks 82 indicators of economic mobility — up from 33 — and connects the dots between data, dollars, and impact. For the first time, users can see how funders’ investments align with nonprofit strategies and best practices, alongside deeper community insights.

The primary challenge Leading on Opportunity set out to solve:

Define

Ask what metrics really define economic mobility — what are the things that if we lean in on those areas, we’d drive change

Monitor

Look over time to see which of those metrics are moving in the right direction and where do we need to lean in further

Align

Our metrics are designed not primarily for accountability, but for alignment. Leading on Opportunity is seeking to use data to get nonprofits, funders, and policymakers working from the same playbook toward the same goals



After more than three years of piloting, workshoping, designing, and building, Leading on Opportunity learned about the kind of information the community needs, where to gather it, and how best to position it so that Charlotte can effectively address economic mobility at a systems level. The team also wanted to package this information in a more visually appealing way to open up new uses, such as community goal setting.

Charlotte’s upward movement in national mobility rankings — from No. 50 to No. 38, and No. 3 in progress — underscores the importance of tools like the Compass in sustaining momentum. The Compass told the community we were on the right track with economic mobility before the updated Chetty data was released in 2024.

The three core determinants (Early Care and Education, Child and Family Stability, College and Career Readiness) and two cross-cutting factors (Segregation, Social Capital) remain in the updated version.

The Opportunity Compass is not a leaderboard, but a library. This tool aims to show the many organizations working together to advance economic mobility in our county.

The updated Opportunity Compass is one of the only data tools in the nation to include metrics on Social Capital, and its four drivers (Access to Opportunity, Collective Flourishing, Strong Communities, Supportive Neighbors).

Civic organizations like the Charlotte Executive Leadership Council and more than 100 nonprofits have already aligned their work to the Opportunity Compass.

The latest version brings together data from funders, nonprofits and best practices, allowing nonprofits and funders to update their data as it becomes available. The Opportunity Compass will be more current and reflective of changing conditions.

The new Opportunity Compass incorporates a more detailed set of community data as well. The original tool included 200 community responses. Among the goals of the updated Compass was to mathematically incorporate community voice into the tool, bridging the grassroots and grasstops in one place.

Community voice is not only considered from a qualitative perspective, but it is quantitatively included into the bedrock of the Compass calculations. Community responses impact the weight given to each indicator, which ultimately determines the driver, determinant, and overall scores.

The update includes more than 650 responses, with increased representation by neighborhood, race, and

income. It provides a shared language and accessible visualizations of the determinants of economic mobility to aid organizations and individuals in policymaking, fundraising, and community organizing.

By seeing all of this information together, the community knows not only what we should be focused on, but also who’s funding it, who’s working on it, and where there is movement. The updated Opportunity Compass will be a valuable tool in tracking and measuring how Charlotte-Mecklenburg maintains that momentum.

Leading on Opportunity found success by working within existing power structures to gradually bring leaders (and power structures) together in new ways. Leading on Opportunity excels at making sure that all power brokers — regardless of their hierarchy — are equipped with knowledge that enables them to be slightly more effective in advocating for change and collaborating more effectively. Leading on Opportunity strives to equip all (grassroots, mid-level, CEO) in a way that enables them to be more effective together, while maintaining their separate positions of power.

Focused on understanding and integration within existing power structures, Leading on Opportunity builds trust and provides valuable insights/information — then, over time, leverages that to create more alignment and synergy on large, collective problems.



Charlotte’s upward movement in national mobility rankings — from No. 50 to No. 38, and No. 3 in progress — underscores the importance of tools like the Compass in sustaining momentum. The Compass told the community we were on the right track with economic mobility before the updated Chetty data was released in 2024.



Advocacy shows up as an organized effort to influence policies, systems, and public decisions so that people — especially those from low-income or historically marginalized communities — have a fair opportunity to improve their economic circumstances. It is less about direct service, and more about changing the conditions that shape opportunity.

Leading on Opportunity’s approach to economic mobility advocacy is the strategic effort to influence public policy, institutional practices, and resource allocation to remove systemic barriers and expand pathways to upward mobility.

A recent example of Leading on Opportunity’s effective advocacy is the passage of a 1-cent sales tax increase in Mecklenburg County for a 30-year transit plan, expected to generate an estimated \$19.4 billion to fund improvements to public transportation, including new rail lines and expanded bus services. Leading on Opportunity played an important agenda-setting and coalition-building role that helped create the civic momentum behind the passage of the increase. The team’s influence was primarily through research, narrative framing, stakeholder convening, and policy advocacy that connected transportation to economic mobility.

Instead of operating transit systems themselves, they helped shift how local leaders understood transportation, from a traffic issue to a poverty and opportunity issue.



Leading on Opportunity works towards policy change through systems change and alignment.

Economic mobility is shaped by multiple systems, such as education, housing, workforce, transportation, and healthcare.

Advocacy helps coordinate these systems so they work together rather than in silos.





Leading on Opportunity works towards policy change through systems change and alignment. Economic mobility is shaped by multiple systems, such as education, housing, workforce, transportation, and healthcare. Advocacy helps coordinate these systems so they work together rather than in silos.

Advocacy often combines research and data, community voice and public narrative. Leading on Opportunity elevates lived experience, centering the perspectives of people directly affected by barriers such as housing instability, wage stagnation and limited access to childcare or transportation.

Leading on Opportunity understood the power of influencing the influencers through advocacy, and the legacy of efficacy set the initiative apart locally and nationally. The advocacy work implemented by Leading on Opportunity focused on informing and bringing together business leaders, philanthropic organizations, government officials and community members. The long work is heavy on relationship building, and changing the policies, systems and investments, so that opportunity is not determined by where someone starts in life.

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Among the examples of advocacy success for Leading on Opportunity:

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Charlotte voters approved continuous increases totalling \$100 million in affordable housing and support of the Housing Trust Fund.
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Mecklenburg County’s \$162.75 million commitment to Universal Pre-K (all 4-year-olds) now serves 115 classrooms and 2,070 four-year-olds at no cost to their families. In addition to MECK Pre-K funding, since 2024 the County has invested \$3.6 million in NC Pre-K through 2026.
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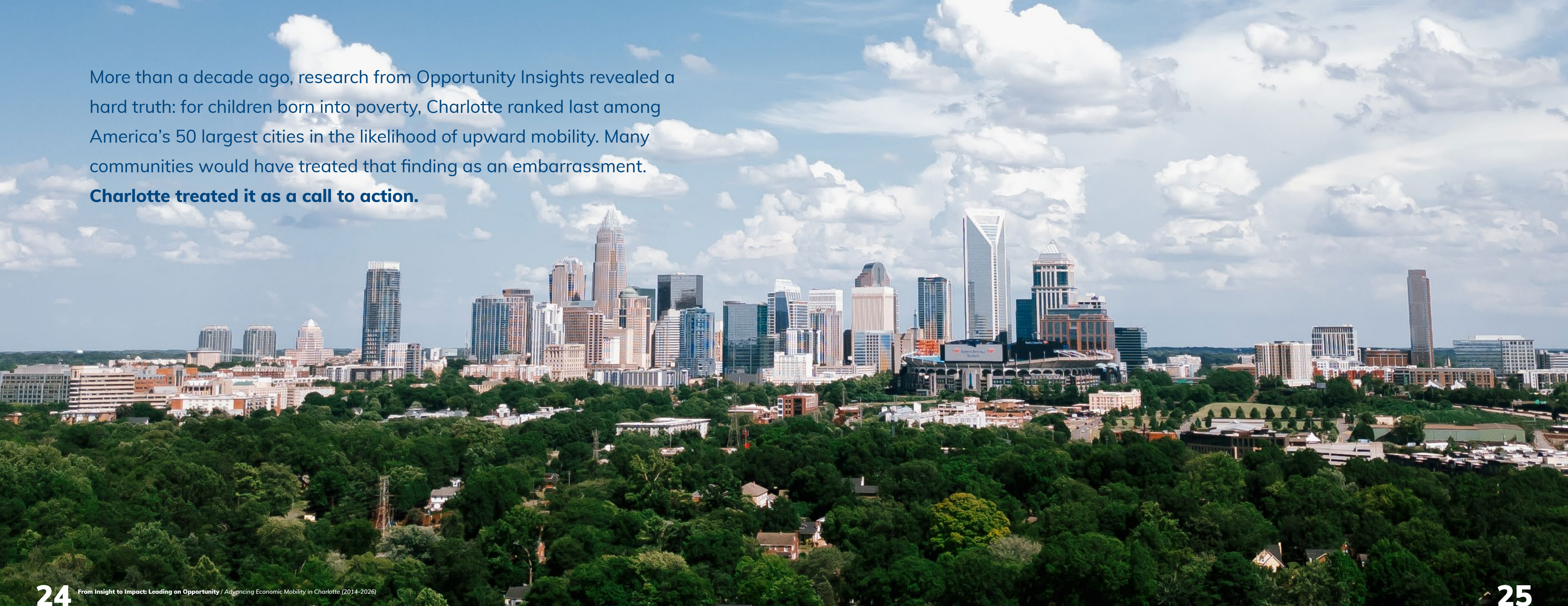
Mecklenburg County Manager Mike Bryant created two leadership roles focused on improving upward mobility and helping all residents rise economically. Dr. Virginia Covill, Leading on Opportunity deputy director of Strategy and Operations, joined the county as Assistant County Manager, focused on workforce development and upward mobility, in January 2026.
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Since 2018, United Way of Greater Charlotte has invested nearly \$51 million in community groups working on housing stability, food security, and poverty reduction — all critical components of economic opportunity.
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The Mayor’s Racial Equity Initiative directed \$250 million to economic mobility, which includes funding for Johnson C. Smith University to produce equitable access, opportunities, and outcomes for Charlotte’s communities of color while transforming JCSU into a top-tier, career-focused HBCU.
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The Charlotte Executive Leadership Council’s Executives in Residence program with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has placed more than 30 companies and organizations in schools through loaned executives, financial contributions, and other support.

More than a decade ago, research from Opportunity Insights revealed a hard truth: for children born into poverty, Charlotte ranked last among America's 50 largest cities in the likelihood of upward mobility. Many communities would have treated that finding as an embarrassment. **Charlotte treated it as a call to action.**





The Crescent Coalition is one of Charlotte’s most strategically important efforts to tackle economic mobility through education. The coalition grew out of a very specific Charlotte problem: an abundance of nonprofits, all doing similar work with almost no coordination between them.

Although many partners were tackling similar problems facing high potential and under-resourced students, Dr. Michael Friedland, founder of the Friedland Foundation, and Aaron Randolph, co-founder of Carolina Youth Coalition, came together to find a solution for the fragmented work. The pair worked together since the 2010s, stopping and starting for a variety of reasons, including the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The name of their effort refers to the “crescent,” a ring of historically under-resourced neighborhoods wrapping west, north, and east of Uptown Charlotte. These areas have long been associated with lower income, educational attainment and economic mobility.

In 2021, Friedland and Randolph approached Leading on Opportunity for their support in building out the Crescent Coalition. Leading on Opportunity was instrumental in the foundational formation, in which partner organizations do a variety of things, including (but not limited to):

- Promote meaningful connections between coalition organizations.
- Work collaboratively to deepen support and improve student outcomes.

By 2023, the Crescent Coalition formally launched with nine founding nonprofits and shared commitment to college and career readiness. Key partners include Carolina Youth Coalition, GenOne, Road to Hire, UrbanPromise and WayFinders.

The efficacy is striking – for the academic year 2023-24, 92 percent of Carolina Youth Coalition scholars were first-generation college students. Of those, there was a 98 percent college enrollment rate, and 75 percent of those scholars are attending college debt-free.

“We did not and can not do it alone,” Randolph says. His organization’s participation in the Crescent Coalition has been transformative for the Carolina Youth Coalition. The community-led association of organizations are committed to catalyzing change in post secondary success by serving under-resourced students along their journey from middle school through college graduation and successful careers. They provide complementary services from multiple organizations for maximum student benefits.

“We see on a daily basis the importance of the wraparound services that Opportunity Insights and Dr. Raj Chetty say are foundational to boosting economic mobility,” Randolph says. “Not because college and career readiness alone is enough, but because combining that with housing, health and social support tackles mobility disparities across multiple dimensions. These interventions map directly onto the local, place-based, social capital–driven framework Opportunity Insights emphasizes.”

While each nonprofit works independently, the coalition coordinates services across a student’s entire journey (for example, middle school, high school, college, career), shares data, best practice and referrals and provides wraparound, multiyear support, not one-off programs.

Crescent Coalition wins include:

11+ Partner Organizations

1,500 students supported through coalition programming in a single year

169 Families and students attended College Financial Aid Night

100 Students attended two collaborative college tours

23 Partner convenings since February 2022

For example, what some might take as a given — going on college tours — is just one part of the Carolina Youth Coalition program that is transformational for students, Randolph says. Higher education may have never been an option or something to consider for many, but once they’re on campus, seeing and talking to people who look like them, it’s a different story. It’s all possible, and there is a support network in place to help make it happen.

“The general camaraderie and community for leaders of emerging college and career readiness organizations has made this work far less lonely, as we lean into each other’s expertise when we are experiencing challenges,” said Ian Joyce, Executive Director of GenOne, one of the nonprofits in the coalition. The support from the coalition begins for students in middle school and follows them to postsecondary education and their eventual careers.

“The Crescent Coalition benefits all students because we can collaborate on programs and services that will help them thrive,” Joyce said in a report from EdNC.

The Crescent Coalition is a community-led association of organizations committed to improving Charlotte’s economic mobility by enhancing pathways for college and career success with these priorities:

- Promote meaningful connections between coalition organizations.
- Share best-practices and data to improve impact and efficiency.
- Work collaboratively to deepen support and improve student outcomes.
- Facilitate successful transitions between organizations as students progress through milestones.
- Provide complementary services from multiple organizations for maximum student benefits

Leading on Opportunity adopted a similar approach in helping Central Piedmont Community College launch Queen City Collaborative, a myFutureNC Local Educational Attainment Collaborative effort to align the efforts of workforce and education-focused organizations in the Charlotte region.

“It sends a powerful message to our community, and even the youth we serve, that we can set aside any egos and work together toward the larger goal of increasing opportunities for postsecondary pathways throughout our city.”

Aaron Randolph
Executive Director,
Carolina Youth Coalition

The Queen City Collaborative set out to create a FAFSA plan in Mecklenburg County to help local students access financial aid for college. This was accomplished through strategic partnerships with local schools/schools systems, colleges, and community organizations to streamline the dissemination of updated FAFSA information.

The second phase of the project involved training and assistance to train counselors, educators, community organizations and volunteers to assist students and parents in completing the FAFSA form accurately and ensure that they are up to date with the latest FAFSA requirements and deadlines. A workshop brought over 100 people together to discuss school action plans to increase FAFSA completion in Mecklenburg County. The training session also served as a networking opportunity among schools, community organizations, and higher education partners to better serve all students in completing FAFSA.





When Leading on Opportunity launched in 2017, the immediate priorities were critical: clearly define economic mobility, align efforts across nonprofits, philanthropy, government and the business community and build trust-worthy collaboration.

While not obvious at first — to Charlotte-Mecklenburg or Leading on Opportunity — the goal was not to solve economic mobility, but to get the larger systems that often were unintentionally limiting to understand, acknowledge and adjust. The initiative worked slowly and steadily to transform siloed efforts into coordinated networks and aligned systems.

That involved starting from the beginning, educating stakeholders about the realities of the work: what could be accomplished and how to realistically interpret metrics and goals. Leading on Opportunity was transparent in its actions and deliverables, largely because of the intentional effort to decenter the organization in the work being done. Leading on Opportunity was there to educate and facilitate.

Through cross-sector convenings, working groups and the development of tools like The Opportunity Compass, Leading on Opportunity introduced a common language, supported by data, to help the community better understand what was required: large-scale systems change through incremental progress.

Leading on Opportunity posed questions to civic leaders and the community and helped solve for the answers: What rules, incentives and structures are producing these limiting outcomes? The initiative recognized quickly that so long as it was asking the wrong questions, it would get the wrong answers. Leading on Opportunity team members spent time ensuring they were working on the right things and asking the right questions.

Through patient, expert leadership, Leading on Opportunity guided a reframing of mobility from a project to become a lens for decision-making. The initiative built a reputation for thoughtful authority that empowered institutions to challenge, own and adjust their internal policies, such as corporations aligning hiring, benefits and procurement; philanthropy tied to mobility outcomes; nonprofits adjusting their goals and missions to support theories of change,



and the public sector integrating mobility into planning, like Charlotte's 2040 plan. By 2023, Leading on Opportunity was deftly shifting from trying to manage economic mobility to rewiring the system that creates it.

When Opportunity Insights released a 2024 follow-up to its landmark study, which saw Charlotte move from No. 50 to 38 in national rankings, Leading on Opportunity's national visibility increased overnight. The demand from peer cities and regions was unprecedented – Charlotte went from case study to classroom.

Leading on Opportunity had been in the midst of scaling influence in Charlotte, not control. The initiative was intentionally decentering itself in the work it was doing on the ground, empowering civic leaders to use the data and information shared in tools like The Opportunity Compass to adjust and align their own policies and strategies.

Through ongoing council and collaboration with the Charlotte Executive Leadership Council (launched in 2015 as an organized group of C-Suite leaders that helped tackle some of the city's biggest issues), Leading on Opportunity was affecting change in the business community.

Nonprofit collaboration with Leading on Opportunity led to successful, thriving collaborations like the Crescent Coalition. The public sector also absorbed the Leading on Opportunity education, with city and county leaders embedding mobility into policy. The small but mighty Leading on Opportunity team was invigorated by the interest in their work, and leaned in, contributing to broader national conversations alongside leaders like Dr. Raj Chetty.



Cities such as Philadelphia, Atlanta, St. Louis, Richmond and Houston began looking to Charlotte for guidance on how to align cross-sector organizations, how to use data and community voice in concert, how to sustain momentum beyond a task force, and how to get long-term ownership from local leaders.

Now, as Charlotte enters a new phase of economic mobility awareness, ownership of the work is distributed across institutions. Data-driven decision-making is embedded in systems, cross-sector accountability is the standard and the integration of community voice is purposeful and strategic.

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Measuring Impacts Beyond Programs



Tracking measurements of economic mobility success can be challenging because it’s so nuanced.

Instead, it’s looking at multiple indicators and factors, and assessing those in concert with other data points. Leading on Opportunity approaches metrics as a library, not a leaderboard. It takes many hands (and organizations) working together to affect change.

Short-term versus long-term outcomes are equally important to economic mobility work, and must be considered in equal parts. If considered separately, perspective is lost. Focusing on long term outcomes is akin to driving the car while looking in the rearview mirror. Focusing on short term outcomes runs the risk of declaring victory too early.

The landmark work of Opportunity Insights and Dr. Raj Chetty spurred action in Charlotte in 2014 and again in 2024. But the work of those studies is largely long term, focused on a cohort of children born in the 1978-1982; the 2024 study focused comparing children born in 1992 with those born in 1978. In both instances, the studies were issued after the children had aged into young adulthood, allowing for their paths to be documented and studied.

Leading on Opportunity developed The Opportunity Compass to provide a sharper, more detailed view of what drives opportunity in Charlotte. The tool tracks 82 indicators of economic mobility and connects the dots between data, dollars, and impact. For the first time, users can see how funders’ investments align with nonprofit strategies and best practices, alongside deeper community insights.

The Opportunity Compass was designed to help the community identify the key drivers of economic mobility, track them over time, and aspirationally align programs and investments to those common metrics. Then and now, the Opportunity Compass is not a ranking, but a library. This tool aims to show the many organizations working together to advance economic mobility in our county.

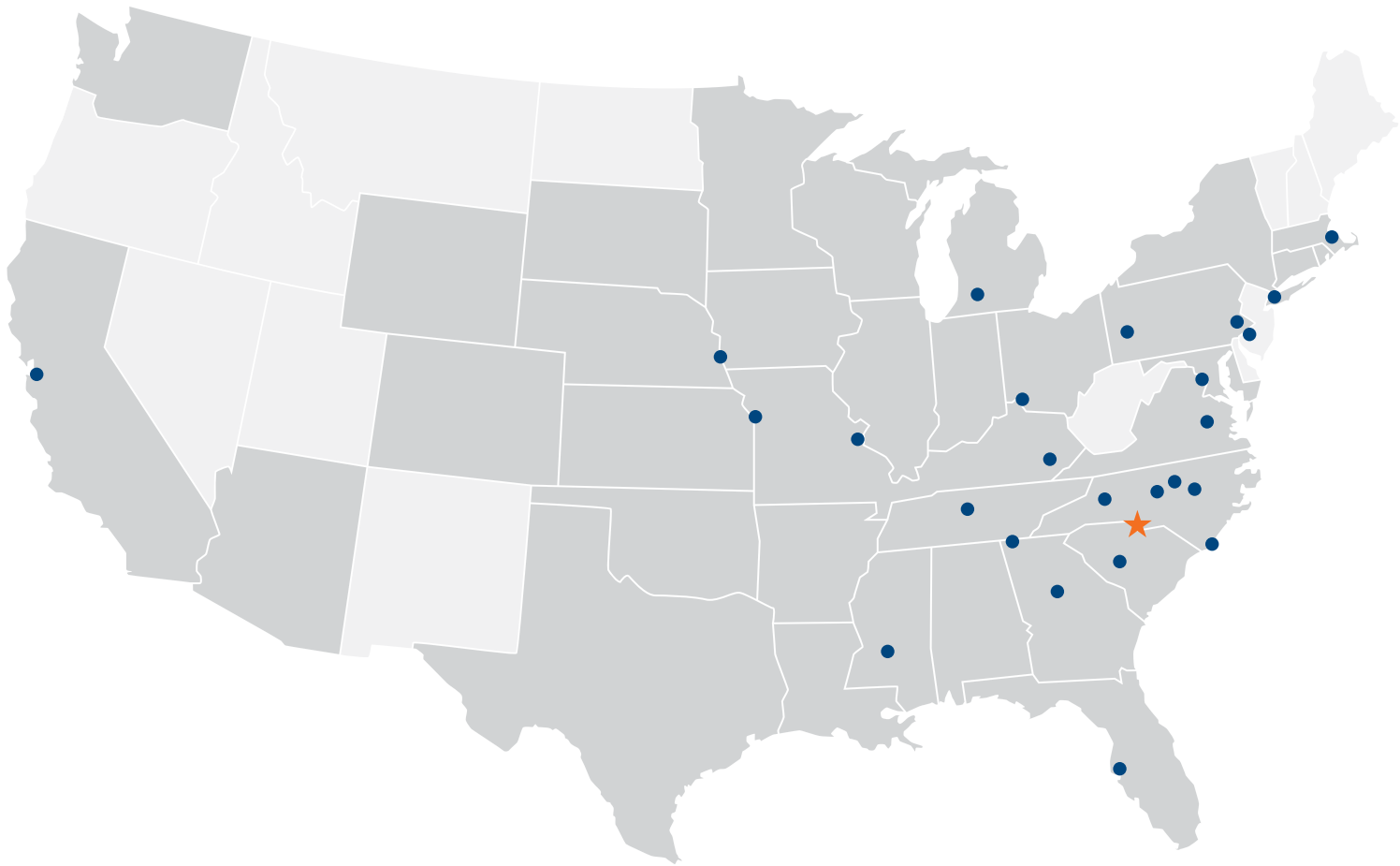


The Opportunity Compass focuses on three core determinants (Early Care and Education, Child and Family Stability, College and Career Readiness) and two cross-cutting factors (Segregation, Social Capital). It is one of the only data tools in the nation to include metrics on Social Capital, and its four drivers (Access to Opportunity, Collective Flourishing, Strong Communities, Supportive Neighbors). Civic organizations like the Charlotte Executive Leadership Council and more than 100 nonprofits have already aligned their work to the Opportunity Compass.

The latest version brings together data from funders, nonprofits and best practices, allowing nonprofits and funders to update their data as it becomes available. The Opportunity Compass will be more current and reflective of changing conditions. Data can be updated/evaluated in two- to three-year increments.

Systems-level indicators can reveal whether the system is shifting, before outcomes fully show it. Among the indicators Leading on Opportunity prioritizes in its Opportunity Compass:

- Funding alignment
- Collaboration between nonprofits
- City/county policy shifts
- Changes in housing, workforce and education policy
- Integration of economic mobility into governmental agencies
- Educational alignment beyond academics
- Nonprofit alignment



25 cities attended the October 2025 convening in Charlotte...

Atlanta, GA	New York, NY
Asheville, NC	Omaha, NE
Cambridge, MA	Philadelphia, PA
Charlotte, NC	Pittsburgh, PA
Chattanooga, TN	Richmond, VA
Cincinnati, OH	San Francisco, CA
Greensboro, NC	St. Louis, MO
Greenville, SC	Tampa, FL
Hazard, KY	Triangle Area, NC
Jackson, MS	Washington, DC
Kalamazoo, MI	Wilmington, NC
Kansas City, MO	Winston-Salem, NC
Nashville, TN	

...and since 2020, our work has reached individuals from 100+ localities from 35 states plus Washington, D.C.

- Wage growth
- Degree attainment
- Employment stability
- Intergenerational mobility trends

Success for Leading on Opportunity’s economic mobility work has never been straight-line improvement, year-over-year gains or a “solve.” Success is systems behaving differently, organizations collaborating by default, policies reinforcing mobility and funding flowing to shared priorities. There is momentum on multiple fronts at the same time, for example education, housing and transportation, with room for iteration. Success is resilience, with systems in place

that are impervious to challenges such as policy changes or funding shortfalls.

For Leading on Opportunity, success is not just tracking people climbing the ladder to upward mobility, but ensuring the ladder itself is rebuilt.

The foundation built by Leading on Opportunity in Charlotte is the template for other regions that wish to change their outcomes. Among the the tools and approaches most in demand by other markets:

The Opportunity Compass model
Seamlessly blending qualitative data with lived experience and best practices to move beyond static dashboard to decision tools.

Cross-sector alignment
Not just convening, but meeting folks where they are to establish shared goals and behavior change

Embedding mobility into major systems
Establishing a team so expert and trusted, they are council for civic leaders. For instance, Dr. Virginia Covill, an integral staffer at Leading on Opportunity, was hired as Mecklenburg County Assistant County Manager, focused on workforce development and upward mobility.

The Long Game
Educating and accepting that economic mobility is a 10-20 year systems challenge, not a 3-year initiative.





Mike Bryant

County Manager | Mecklenburg County

Mike Bryant became Mecklenburg County Manager in June 2025, overseeing county services and agencies that serve more than 1.2 million people with a budget of more than \$2.5 billion.

He’s been part of county government since 2003, starting as a management and budget analyst for one of the largest counties in the state. Economic mobility has never been far from his mind, in theory or practice.

“When you think about quality of life, it’s not just looking at it individually from an economic mobility (perspective),” he says. “It’s looking at it from workforce development, it’s looking at it from education, looking at it from affordable housing. All of those contribute to economic mobility. It’s all connected. It’s an ecosystem.”

Bryant has prioritized economic mobility for the county, and is putting systems (and people) in place to ensure that happens. He hired Dr. Virginia Covill as the assistant county manager of Workforce Development and Upward Mobility, and Christopher Rivera as the director of the Economic Mobility division of the county’s Department of Community Resources.

“Upward mobility begins with a decision, the community’s decision that all residents – regardless of zip code – will have a chance to improve their economic, educational, social, or professional standing,” Bryant said when the new roles were announced earlier this year. “These two roles will be foundational in my commitment to continuous growth, resilience, and the belief that effort can transform opportunity into achievement.”

With economic mobility in mind, Bryant has increased the lowest wage for full-time employees of the county to \$25.53 from \$20 (\$25.53 is the living wage for Charlotte-Mecklenburg).

His recommendations for the county budget for fiscal year 2026-27 include funds that boost learning and educational opportunities through Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Central Piedmont Community College, and the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library.

He also recommended funding for expanding jobs and economic opportunities, including \$1.6 million for Project BOAST to mitigate the unintended impact that transportation and infrastructure-related projects will have on small businesses; \$200,000 to establish a social worker pathways program at Johnson C. Smith University; \$1.7 million to expand Road to Hire, which supports high school students in their career journeys, and \$200,000 to support career lab training and advancement in partnership with Year-Up United.

The Road to Hire and Year-Up United partnerships will allow Mecklenburg County to establish guaranteed positions for individuals who have successfully completed programming through the Lasalle Building Initiative, further enhancing the path toward real economic mobility.

“All of that ranks high as it relates to getting a job and ensuring you have a living wage, a career trajectory,” Bryant says. “Because when those individuals acquire that, they’re able to transition to being more self-sufficient, as opposed to relying on county assistance. Then they are contributing to the local economy.”

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Dr. Devonya Govan-Hunt

President | Black Child Development-Carolinas

The mission of Black Child Development-Carolinas is strikingly simple: every child is born brilliant, a reflection of culture, community, and possibility. The Charlotte-based nonprofit focuses on improving the quality of life for Black children and families through education, advocacy, and literacy programs.

But getting there is a long game, says Dr. Devonya Govan-Hunt, President of Black Child Development-Carolinas, one that requires unrelenting grassroots and grasstops work.

The organization was volunteer-based when it started in 2007, focused on improving literacy in children primarily on the east side of Charlotte in Title I schools. There was progress, but it was slow going, and Govan-Hunt saw potential to help more families.

“Families that don’t have access to high-quality early care and education, and they can’t go to work,” she says. “When parents have more understanding of what’s possible for their children, they want to take action.”

By 2020, she had assembled a small but mighty staff and organized around five areas of impact: Family and Community Engagement; Health and Wellness; Literacy; Policy; and Early Childhood Education.

“Policy doesn’t matter unless parents can actually see it activated in their communities, and they can see themselves as a part of the puzzle and a piece of a larger picture,” Govan-Hunt says.

North Carolina loses \$5.65 billion every year in economic activity due to the lack of child care, according to a 2024 report from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, the NC Chamber Foundation, and NC Child.

Black Child Development-Carolinas now serves more than 23,000 families a year, primarily through the Family Empowerment Program, which focuses on building the capacity of parents and caregivers as leaders and advocates of their families. The 12-week program equips families to foster their children’s learning and development while effectively advocating for them from birth. The program was designed to guide and coach parents and caregivers through a strengths-based lens that honors the rich cultural and linguistic strengths of families of color.

The organization also distributes 168,000 free pieces of culturally-relevant literature a year, works in 17 Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, 23 child care centers, manages seven community gardens, and has almost 200 children in after-school programs.

Govan-Hunt and her team are also building an army of educated advocates who use their voices in Raleigh and beyond. She recently took a group of parents to Washington, D.C. to speak with North Carolina legislators.

“If our children are going to have a better future than we have now, if we’re going to achieve the goals that we want for our kids right now, this is what it looks like down the road,” she says.

“Parents are saying it’s important for kids to have a solid foundation, a solid start. Once they leave my house, they’ve got to have someplace else to go that’s gonna nurture and support them, and give them what they need in order to be able to grow into some of these jobs and opportunities.”

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Ralphine Caldwell

Senior Executive Director | LISC Charlotte

When the Charlotte office of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) opened in 2019, civic leaders had coalesced behind improving economic mobility and were looking to take action, especially around raising capital and housing opportunities.

LISC is the nation's largest community development organization, dedicated to making upward mobility a reality for all, according to Ralphine Caldwell, Senior Executive Director of LISC Charlotte. By bringing together resources from the public, private, and philanthropic sectors, LISC Charlotte works to strengthen Charlotte's economy and create opportunities for all residents to thrive. Since 2019, LISC Charlotte has invested more than \$170 million and leveraged an additional \$583 million to support affordable housing, small businesses, community health and safety initiatives, and the capacity building of grassroots organizations across Charlotte.

LISC manages the Charlotte Housing Opportunity Investment Fund (CHOIF), which launched in 2019. Through a unique public-private partnership spearheaded by the City of Charlotte and Foundation For The Carolinas, CHOIF was created to increase the availability of affordable housing in the Charlotte area by combining the City of Charlotte's Housing Trust Fund dollars with private and philanthropic investments. Since its inception, the fund has supported the creation and preservation of nearly 2,400 affordable housing units across Mecklenburg County.

LISC also invests in grassroots housing organizations through capacity-building funding to strengthen their ability to develop and preserve housing and provide supportive services for individuals and families in need of stable housing.

In partnership with Knight Foundation, LISC launched its work in Charlotte with a focus on the Historic West End. Through its collaboration with Historic West End Partners, a grassroots 501(c)(3) business district organization, LISC has helped build strong partnerships among businesses, residents, institutions, property owners, and investors. As a result, legacy businesses continue to anchor the neighborhood, while new small businesses are flourishing with the support of grants and investment funds that LISC helped community members secure.

"When you're that embedded in a neighborhood, working with like-minded partners, things happen in a way that creates trust, economic mobility and community stability," Caldwell says.

Students at Johnson C. Smith University noted there was no nearby place to get pizza. Entrepreneur Diana Ward approached Historic West End Partners about purchasing a building near campus. That conversation led to collaboration between the Knight Foundation, LISC, and the City of Charlotte, enabling Ward to acquire the property and open a Jet's Pizza location. The block now also includes a pocket park and community gathering space. Soon, the area will add a food co-op, housing, and retail space—long envisioned by the community to address housing needs, food insecurity, and the lack of nearby amenities.

LISC Charlotte leverages its national partnerships to benefit Mecklenburg County residents, including a partnership with Care Ring to provide free Uber Health rides for patients. Supported by a \$300,000 grant from the LISC Health Access Fund, the program has provided more than 26,000 rides to help patients access medical appointments.

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Jonathan Gardner

Founding Executive Director | GardHouse

When Jonathan Gardner moved to Charlotte from Philadelphia after completing his undergraduate studies at La Salle University, all signs were pointing up. But he quickly learned just how challenging the job market can be for college graduates, especially those of color, while trying to access professional networks, internships, and career opportunities in the Queen City.

Realizing that Black college graduates had been significantly more likely to experience unemployment than their white peers despite earning degrees, Gardner got to work. He launched GardHouse in 2019 as a 501(c)3, dedicated to serving low-to-moderate income and first-generation students with paid internships, financial literacy, career coaching, professional development, and connections to local employers.

Economic mobility, and 2014 research from Opportunity Insights, played a key role in the mission and scope of GardHouse, he says. Improving economic mobility requires more than helping students get into and then through college, it means helping them successfully transition into careers.

GardHouse works with small and mid-sized businesses, nonprofits, and public-sector employers to create meaningful work experiences that students might otherwise struggle to access.

Through personalized, high-touch, structured work, GardHouse helps students build professional networks, gain career-aligned experience, develop workplace skills, and graduate with stronger employment prospects. The organization has connected hundreds of Charlotte-area students to paid internships while helping employers build more diverse talent pipelines.

"We're averaging a 100% success rate for students that have gone through our program and into employment," Gard says. "Right now, we are at 60 students that have gone into employment after graduating from our program."

Gardner is cautiously optimistic about the organic growth and reach of his organization. His vision has helped create a more inclusive workforce and expanded pathways to long-term economic opportunity in Charlotte. There's no better time or greater need for the collective work GardHouse and other organizations are doing in Charlotte and beyond, he says.

This is generational work, and systems change takes time.

"Charlotte needs to keep this steam that we have developed to get us from 50 to 38 to hopefully get us closer to number one," Gardner says. "Individuals need to hold each other's hands and walk in unison for the greater good of Charlotte and not for self."

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“We’re averaging a 100% success rate for students that have gone through our program and into employment. We are at 60 students that have gone into employment after graduating from our program.”



Since its launch in 2017, Leading on Opportunity has been sustained not only by data, advocacy and policy work, but by a powerful network of early champions and long-term supporters who validated the urgency — and legitimacy — of Charlotte’s economic mobility movement.

Their support helped transform what could have been a short-lived civic response into one of the country’s most closely watched regional efforts to address intergenerational poverty.

The organization emerged directly from the work of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Opportunity Task Force, which formed after research led by Dr. Raj Chetty showed Charlotte ranked last among the nation’s 50 largest cities for economic mobility. Rather than dispute the findings, a coalition of civic, business, philanthropic, nonprofit, education, and grassroots leaders chose to confront them publicly. That decision alone represented an extraordinary act of validation. Charlotte’s leadership acknowledged that prosperity was not reaching everyone equally, and committed to doing something about it.

Early champions gave the work institutional credibility. Leaders such as Andrea Smith and Dr. James Ford served as inaugural co-chairs of the Leading on Opportunity Council, signaling that economic mobility was not merely a nonprofit issue, but a regional priority requiring cross-sector ownership. Their involvement encouraged corporations, foundations, faith leaders, and public officials to stay engaged long after the initial headlines faded.

Long-term philanthropic partners also played a critical role in validating the work. Foundation for the Carolinas incubated the initiative and helped sustain momentum by association for Leading on Opportunity. The initiative picked up velocity through convening and connecting power, nurturing funding relationships and helping build out civic leadership infrastructure. City and county government partners and community institutions reinforced that Charlotte’s mobility challenges required long-range investment rather than temporary programs.

Perhaps most importantly, champions validated the work by continuing to show up over time. Leading on Opportunity team members reciprocated that engagement, getting out into the community and seizing any opportunity to discuss their work, share information and make connections. Economic mobility is difficult because results often take decades to materialize. Yet civic leaders, funders, researchers, educators, and neighborhood advocates continued building partnerships, aligning investments, and supporting policy conversations even when progress was nonlinear.

That persistence allowed Leading on Opportunity to evolve from awareness-building into execution, particularly after Executive Director Sherri Chisholm joined in 2020 and expanded the organization’s focus on strategy, policy, and measurable data outcomes.

The development of the Opportunity Compass became another form of validation. By creating a public-facing tool that tracked indicators, investments, best practices, and community priorities, Leading on Opportunity demonstrated that Charlotte’s mobility work was becoming more coordinated, transparent, and data-driven.

Ultimately, early believers gave the movement credibility. Long-term champions gave it staying power. Together, they helped ensure that economic mobility in Charlotte became not just a moment of civic concern, but a sustained community commitment that has become a national model for catalyzing communities around generational systems change work.

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GOVERNMENT

City of Atlanta Office of the Mayor
City of Charlotte
Mecklenburg County

PHILANTHROPY

Atlanta Way 2.0
Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation
Foundation for the Carolinas
The Gambrell Foundation
Inclusive Prosperity Partnership
James S. McDonnell Foundation
RVA Rising
Community Foundation for a Greater Richmond
The Philadelphia Foundation
Comcast

DATA PARTNERS

CF Leads
Urban Institute
Opportunity Insights
Deloitte

FUNDERS

Accenture LLP
Ally
American Endowment Foundation
The Annie E. Casey Foundation
Anonymous
Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation
Atrium Health
Bank of America
Bank of America Matching Gifts Program
Black Economic Alliance
Camber Collective
C.D. Spangler Foundation
The Center for Black Health & Equity
CFLeads
City of Charlotte – Neighborhood Development
Comcast NBCUniversal
Community Action Program Legal Services, Inc.
Community Foundation for a Greater Richmond
Community Link Programs of Traveler Aid Society, Inc.
Community Matters Insurance Partners of Charlotte
Davidson College
Deloitte
Duke Energy
The Duke Endowment
Educational Credit Management Corporation Foundation
Equitable Foundation
EY
Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia
Fidelity Foundation
Foundation for the Carolinas
Foundation for Social Connection
The Gambrell Foundation
J. P. Morgan Chase Foundation
John S. & James L. Knight Foundation
Lowe’s
The Leon Levine Foundation
Mecklenburg County
Mecklenburg County Manager’s Office
Moore & Van Allen
NEO Philanthropy
New Venture Fund
North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, Inc.
North Carolina Healthcare Foundation, Inc.
Novant Health
Queens University of Charlotte
TIAA
Truist
TTX Company
University of Pittsburgh
United Way of Greater Charlotte
Urban Institute
US Bank
Vanguard Charitable Endowment Program
Wells Fargo Foundation
Winer Family Foundation
Winston-Salem Foundation, Inc.
Women’s Impact Fund
Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation

What We Have Learned



Photo courtesy Guy Bryant / Adobe Stock

Over the past decade, Leading on Opportunity has served as a convener, advocate, and guide, ensuring that Charlotte-Mecklenburg never lost sight of the central challenge of economic mobility. Leading on Opportunity has played a pivotal role in keeping economic mobility at the forefront of civic and policy conversations, catalyzing investments, aligning priorities, and building capacity locally and nationally.

Charlotte is a banking town, no stranger to numbers, forecasts, and bottom lines. Economic mobility is not just charts and data. It's people and relationships. Leading on Opportunity quickly realized, as leaders, we have the resources — and responsibility — to move the needle. This work demands collaboration. No one sector can go it alone. It takes business, government, nonprofits, faith communities, and residents sitting at the same table, speaking honestly, and acting boldly.

Perhaps more importantly, Leading on Opportunity and the city quickly learned this isn't easy work. There is no silver bullet. But there is a path forward, and one that includes more of what Leading on Opportunity had started doing: building relationships, asking questions, being a connector between different groups and helping them to realize they're not so far apart after all.

Leading on Opportunity has worked and is working because it is a reflection of who Charlotte is and what makes us tick.

Charlotte has a history of addressing disparity. We are fortunate to have strong partnerships between our non-profits, municipalities and our business community. As a city and region, we are committed to this work. Leading on Opportunity helped identify the key stakeholders, align them and commit to the work. The initiative prioritized building relationships, articulating shared barriers, and was a consistent presence. Lessons learned include confronting hard truths:

- Building community requires confronting power: who has it, who hoards it, and who is excluded from shaping their own futures.

- Community isn't static, it's an ongoing practice.
- Community (particularly in the South) has often been engineered — through churches, mutual aid societies, Historically Black Colleges, and front-porch economies — rather than assumed.
- Intra-racial tensions matter: within Black, Latino, and white Southern communities, class and generational divides shape who feels represented and who doesn't.

Leading on Opportunity had a front-row seat to see what it takes to build and sustain community today:

- **Courageous Storytelling**
Communities need narrators who tell the whole truth, not just the celebratory chapters.
- **Spaces for Friction**
Progress comes not from avoiding disagreement but from creating tables where conflict leads to deeper understanding.



- **Cross-Generational Leadership**
Honor elders' wisdom while empowering younger voices shaping the South's future.
- **Multiracial Coalition-Building**
Highlight local examples where collaboration across racial and economic lines is driving systemic change.
- **Centering Belonging**
Ask not "Who lives here?" but "Who thrives here?" and let that question guide policy, business, and civic life.

With grit and determination, Leading on Opportunity encouraged civic leaders to see that progress is possible, and that bringing different voices to the table to join the conversation helps meet people where they are. Repetition was key in approach and topical concerns. Transportation, housing and childcare topped the list a decade ago, and are still just as important today.

Leading on Opportunity expertly, patiently helped business leaders see how childcare wasn't just a "women's issue," it was a workforce issue. Leading on Opportunity armed leaders with data, facts and gave them tools to advocate, and challenged them to think bigger. How do we build neighborhoods that unlock potential, not limit it?

Leading on Opportunity has been the single initiative driving alignment of the conversation and alignment around economic mobility in Charlotte-Mecklenburg across philanthropy, government, and business.

The initiative has helped maintain focus, align stakeholders, and advocate for systemic policy change. Through that singular pursuit and clear vision, the economic mobility work in Charlotte was elevated as an inspirational model, and Leading on Opportunity seen as a trusted resource and nationally recognized voice on how communities can take on the generational challenge of economic mobility.



Through the policy, data and strategy work of Leading on Opportunity in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, more than \$1 billion has been invested in targeted strategies to expand economic mobility since 2014, including in key areas:

\$280M

Housing Trust Fund

\$200M

Foundation for the Carolinas
Housing Fundraising

\$250M

Mayor's Racial Equity Initiative

\$162.75M

Meck Pre-K

\$160M

Expansion of Sectoral
Job Training Programs

\$51M

United Way shifted all grants
to economic mobility

These investments represent long-term systems change, addressing housing stability, workforce pathways, early childhood education and racial equity.



Looking Forward

After nearly a decade of innovative systems-change leadership and directing more than \$1B to economic mobility efforts across the region, Leading on Opportunity will sunset operations by June 30, 2026.

This chapter is ending, but the work of economic mobility continues in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and we are proud of the role this initiative played in moving it forward.

Since the inception of Leading on Opportunity in 2017, Charlotte-Mecklenburg has moved more than \$1 billion to economic mobility through public investment and philanthropic support. The most significant commitments have been to affordable housing, early education, workforce development, and racial equity. And perhaps most importantly, economic mobility has become deeply integrated into the region's institutions.

Leading on Opportunity has fundamentally changed the way the community approaches large-scale problems. The initiative created a shared language for collaborative action, inspired the structure and priorities of the Charlotte Executive Leadership Council (CELC), enabled the creation of more than 5,000 affordable housing units, laid the systemic groundwork for Charlotte's 2040 Comprehensive Plan, and aligned the budgets of the city, county, school system, United Way, Inlivan, Charlotte Works, as well as scores of nonprofits.

Catalyzed by Dr. Raj Chetty's seismic 2014 Opportunity Insights study ranking Charlotte last among the 50 largest US cities, and Mecklenburg No. 99 of 100 counties in upward mobility, Leading on Opportunity focused on facilitating change through the use of strategy, policy, and data. The initiative, housed at Foundation for the Carolinas, has since been advocating for and tracking systemic change and progress in Charlotte that often goes unseen by the public, but not unfelt.



The spotlight was again on Charlotte in 2024, as another Opportunity Insights/Chetty study showed improvement – Charlotte moved from No. 50 to 38 in economic mobility (the ability of children from low-income families to climb the income ladder and thrive). Charlotte ranked No. 3 out of 50 on economic mobility progress, moving upward faster than peer cities. In addition, Mecklenburg is the only county in the country where low-income white children experienced no decline in economic mobility.

That progress belies the current state of affairs in Charlotte, and beyond. The landscape for economic mobility work remains vital, but is changing. Priorities have shifted to immediate community needs like transportation, public safety, and food insecurity. And many organizations moved to single year and/or reduced funding for economic mobility.

While this chapter is ending, the work of economic mobility continues in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and Leading on Opportunity is proud of the role it has played in moving it forward. Examples of success include:

- Mecklenburg County Manager Mike Bryant created two leadership roles focused on improving upward mobility and helping all residents rise economically. Dr. Virginia Covill, Leading on Opportunity Deputy Director of Strategy and Operations, joined the county as Assistant County Manager, focused on workforce development and upward mobility, in January.
- Leading on Opportunity played a key role in the passage of a 1-cent sales tax increase in Mecklenburg County for a 30-year transit plan, expected to generate an estimated \$19.4 billion to fund improvements to public transportation, including new rail lines and expanded bus services.

- Charlotte voters approved a \$100M investment in affordable housing and increase of the Housing Trust Fund.
- Since the inception of Meck Pre-K in 2018, the County has invested \$162.75M through FY26, which serves more than 2,000 four-year-olds at no cost to their families.
- United Way of Greater Charlotte overhauled its funding strategy to focus on economic mobility through investments in neighborhood and grassroots organizations.
- The Mayor's Racial Equity Initiative, which includes funding for Johnson C. Smith University to produce equitable access, opportunities, and outcomes for Charlotte's communities of color while transforming JCSU into a top-tier, career-focused HBCU.
- The Charlotte Executive Leadership Council's Executives in Residence program with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has placed more than 30 companies and organizations in schools through loaned executives, financial contributions, and other support

The Robinson Center for Civic Leadership at Foundation for the Carolinas will assume stewardship of The Opportunity Compass. As the work of economic mobility evolves in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, strategic pillars must be maintained:

- Convene and align stakeholders to establish community goals for equitable growth and economic mobility focused on transportation, workforce and housing
- Advance local and state policy and funding to reach goals
- Provide premier data tools and expertise to equip localities across the Carolinas to measure progress and ensure effectiveness for equitable growth initiatives
- Serve as a trusted partner in activating economic mobility movements elsewhere by providing customized service offerings

Eleven years ago, Charlotte was held up as the worst city in America for economic mobility. Today, Charlotte has moved up 12 places, not by chance, but through intentional collaboration, investment, and alignment.

Charlotte's mission for the next decade of economic mobility work is clear: sustain continued alignment through strategic goal setting and policy efforts, deepen data capacity, and expand embedded economic mobility work in Charlotte.

Charlotte's journey is far from over, but the progress made demonstrates what is possible when a city comes together with shared purpose. Leading on Opportunity built the foundation, the vocabulary and tools for the region to ensure that every child born in Carolinas has a real chance to thrive.

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Charlotte’s progress on economic mobility did not happen because one organization, one government official, one corporation, or one foundation acted alone. It happened because a community — however imperfectly, unevenly, but persistently — choose to confront hard truths together.

Now, nearly a decade after the original “50 out of 50” wake-up call, Charlotte faces a defining question: Will this work be a 10-year moment, or become a lasting civic commitment? The data shows that progress is possible. Charlotte has moved from last place to No. 38 among the nation’s 50 largest metro areas in economic mobility, according to the updated research from Opportunity Insights published in 2024. But increased rankings alone are not the goal. The real measure is whether more children — regardless of ZIP code, race, or family income — have a genuine chance to build stable, thriving lives.

That is why this moment requires renewed leadership from funders, partners, and civic institutions across Charlotte, and the nation. Charlotte is a living example that moving from impact to momentum is possible, especially when the topics are uncomfortable and the work challenging.

Leading on Opportunity infused its DNA with organizations and initiatives across city, state and nation. Leading on Opportunity has shown the community (and nation) that economic mobility isn’t just a nonprofit issue — it’s a broad, deep issue that touches nearly every segment of a community. Charlotte is in a period of transition, with pillars of the community shifting and a greater awareness and acceptance that economic mobility work is spreading across the business community, and changing the ways nonprofits approach their work.

For philanthropy, the call is to move beyond fragmented giving toward sustained, aligned investment. Economic mobility is not a one-year grant cycle problem. Leading on Opportunity learned that in real time, as the initiative was launched with a 30-year scope, but only three years

of funding at launch. It requires patient capital, shared metrics, trust-based partnerships, and support for systems that outlast individual initiatives. The organizations closest to communities need flexible resources to innovate, collaborate, and scale what works.

That funding-matching-scope message is coming through loud and clear in other localities across the country, as they work to stand up initiatives of their own in Atlanta, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Richmond and Houston. Most cite the work of Leading on Opportunity as key to their foundational organizational structure and their ability to right-size expectations, like matching length of initiative with adequate funding.

For business leaders, the call is equally urgent. Economic mobility is not separate from Charlotte’s competitiveness — it is central to it. A city cannot continue attracting talent, investment, and opportunity if large portions of its population remain disconnected from pathways to prosperity. Employers have enormous influence through wages, hiring practices, workforce development,



procurement, internships, mentorship, and civic advocacy. Charlotte’s future workforce is already here. The question is whether the corporate drivers chose to invest in it.

For public sector and civic leaders, the work requires long-term courage. Mobility challenges cannot be solved through isolated programs or political cycles. Housing, transit, early childhood education, healthcare access, digital equity, public safety, and neighborhood investment are deeply interconnected. Progress depends on maintaining alignment even when priorities compete, federal-level policies change and outcomes take years to materialize.

And for cross-sector partners, the call is simple but difficult: stay at the table. One of Charlotte’s greatest strengths since 2017 has been its willingness to convene grassroots and grassroots leaders around a shared challenge. That spirit must continue. Communities rarely fail because they lack ideas; they fail because alignment erodes over time.

Dr. Raj Chetty and Opportunity Insights published their first seismic study in 2014, and revisited it in a 2024 study. By

his math, Charlotte will see the first signs of our collective effort of the past 10 years in the work of future studies. It cannot be overstated: this is generational work and data. If the same pace is kept, a study on children born around the early 2000s would be published in 2034, and the early 2010s by 2044; children being born today by 2054. Leading on Opportunity helped create infrastructure for that alignment — shared language, shared data, shared accountability, and increasingly, shared ownership. As the Leading on Opportunity initiative draws to a close in 2026, the next phase of Charlotte’s mobility journey will depend on whether institutions continue building on that foundation together.

While Dr. Chetty’s data centers Black Charlotteans (descendants of enslaved people), the findings offer important insights into the broader systems that shape economic mobility across our community. The research was not inclusive of the Latino community until the 2024 study. Civic leaders must not underestimate the importance of the Latino population in the Charlotte region. U.S. Census Bureau data says the Hispanic population has increased by

Dr. Chetty once noted that “places where adults are employed and healthy and otherwise doing well have a tremendous effect on the next generation.” It is the responsibility of Charlotte (and other localities across the country) to ensure that those kinds of places — and opportunities — exist for everyone, not just a fortunate few.



a combined 22% across Mecklenburg, Cabarrus, Catawba, Gaston, Iredell, Lincoln and Union counties, in 2021-25. The Leading on Opportunity team understood the impact of the growing Latino population, and adapted their work over the years to foster inclusion and access.

Dr. Chetty once noted that “places where adults are employed and healthy and otherwise doing well have a tremendous effect on the next generation.” It is the responsibility of Charlotte (and other localities across the country) to ensure that those kinds of places — and opportunities — exist for everyone, not just a fortunate few.

Leading on Opportunity Case Study (as published in April 2025)

How to Build a Mobility Movement:
Leading on Opportunity's Approach
to Economic Mobility in Charlotte.

Leading on Opportunity Genesis

Charlotte in 2014 was all gas, no brakes: construction cranes filled the sky over Uptown, millennials streamed into the city, driving the demand for breweries, craft cocktails and hot yoga. The city was still basking in the international glow from successfully hosting the Democratic National Convention two years prior. Charlotte was a prosperous, thriving city on the rise.

So in that same year when a study by Dr. Raj Chetty of Harvard University's Opportunity Insights was released which ranked Charlotte last among the 50 largest US cities, and Mecklenburg No. 99 out of 100 counties in upward mobility, the reaction in the city was seismic. It was a wake-up call for some, and an overdue acknowledgement for others.

Charlotte responded with urgency, creating the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Opportunity Task Force led by Dr. Ophelia Garmon-Brown and Dee O'Dell. That led to the Opportunity Task Force Report intended to be a living document offering 21 strategies, multiple recommendations and tactics to improve upward mobility. Leading on Opportunity was created in 2017 as an initiative of the Foundation for the Carolinas, to continue Charlotte's commitment and maintain momentum toward progress in economic mobility. Leading on Opportunity has since been advocating for and tracking the progress in Charlotte that is often not readily available to the public through data, strategy and policy. Change is happening in large part through public-private partnerships, says Sherri Chisholm, who joined Leading on Opportunity in 2020 as executive director.

Leading on Opportunity is the bridge between the statistical, data-driven world and that of partners doing the work in the community, building on efforts that launched as early as the 1960s, picking up momentum in the 1980s. Among those efforts: Charlotte's economic boom, interstate banking, financial headquarters relocations, civic-led response to textile mill closures and prioritizing children's health, safety and education.

Leading on Opportunity Mission, Vision & Impact

Leading on Opportunity works to ensure that each child has the freedom and chance to dream, pursue those dreams and live a purposeful life — without exception. Leading on Opportunity endeavors to unite resources, embolden leaders and ignite civic imagination toward the prosperity of the next generation. Leading on Opportunity advises organizations on how to use data and build cross-sector relationships that accelerate Charlotte-Mecklenburg's progress and action toward improved economic mobility. Success is Charlotte and Mecklenburg County sharing commitment, aligning resources, and collectively working to improve economic mobility.

Leading on Opportunity Goals

Charlotte in many ways has and continues to be ahead in its approach to community progress. Collectively, the city refused to accept its low ranking, and made a commitment to improve lives in Charlotte. Charlotte is fortunate to have City and Council leaders who have made very intentional investments in data (for example, the City's Quality of Life Explorer. Charlotte has a thriving corporate sector that is attracting and recruiting talented data analysts all the time. There are numerous colleges and universities with ample student and faculty talent.

What was missing was a central entity to translate existing data into meaningful insights, and more importantly, action for local leaders. That is the sweet spot for Leading on Opportunity: applying structure and accountability to that momentum.

By 2027, Leading on Opportunity will continue to refine the gathering of data and knowledge; inform, equip and embolden civic leaders; advise on action towards sustained mobility, and create a sustainable organization.

“Chetty” Studies 2014 vs. 2024

Opportunity Insights, the Harvard University-based research group led by Dr. Chetty, in 2024 published Changing Opportunity: Sociological Mechanisms Underlying Growing Class Gaps and Shrinking Race Gaps in Economic Mobility, which showed Charlotte moved from No. 50 to 38 in economic mobility (the ability of children from low-income families to climb the income ladder and thrive).

Charlotte is now ranked No. 3 out of 50 on economic mobility progress, moving upward faster than peer cities. In addition, Mecklenburg is the only county in the country where low-income white children experienced no decline in economic mobility. However, progress is not a zero-sum game. The new study examines children born in 1992 across the United States—focusing on the bottom 20 percent of income distribution (about \$26,000 annual household income)—and compares the data to children born in 1978. Outcomes for children born in 1978 were the subject of the 2014 Chetty study, which ranked Charlotte last among the 50 largest US cities.

The Changing Opportunity study shows racial gaps are closing, but class gaps are widening nationally. Low-income white children are doing worse or remaining the same, while low-income Black children are improving.

“These results show that growing up in thriving communities — places where adults are employed and healthy and otherwise doing well — have a tremendous effect on the next generation,” Chetty says. “The new data shows that opportunity can change and points to lessons on how to change intergenerational opportunity in a fairly rapid timeframe,” he says.

Outcomes for low-income White, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American children have not deteriorated in Charlotte.

Charlotte's Progress

Charlotte's progress is supported up by a three-legged stool of an expanding economy, public/private partnerships, and nonprofits offering navigation services. When those determinants are working in coordination, barriers to economic mobility fall.

The Milken Institute named Charlotte among the top 10 cities for economic growth in 2024, citing the city's rapid job increase and expanding population. According to Charlotte Regional Business Alliance, an estimated 113 people move to the region every day.

Groups like the Crescent Coalition, an association of organizations committed to improving Charlotte's economic mobility for under-resourced students by helping them

navigate middle school, high school, and college and ultimately enter the job market, are crucial for offering surround sound support to those in need.

Markers of Charlotte's public/private partnership progress in the past 10 years include:

- The Charlotte Executive Leadership Council's Executives in Residence program with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has placed more than 30 companies and organizations in schools through loaned executives, financial contributions, and other support
- The investment in affordable housing and increase of the Housing Trust Fund from \$15M to \$50M, with another proposed increase to \$100M on the table
- Mecklenburg County's \$60M commitment to create Universal Pre-K (all 4-year-olds)

Advocacy in Action

The Opportunity Task Force report, which led to the creation of Leading on Opportunity, mentioned policy 57 times, recommending actions such as addressing damaging policy failures, urging funding of programmatic design and informed policy decisions, advocacy and having a voice in development of state policy agendas.



- State** Catalyst action for ECE policy legislation
- Local** Identify and support creative ECE solutions
- Regional** Educate stakeholders about ECE policy priorities

From the Task Force report: “The community’s greatest leverage for tackling intergenerational poverty and breaking down barriers to economic opportunity will come from focusing on systemic and structural change versus relying upon programmatic intervention.”

Leading on Opportunity is a proxy between organizations across sectors, and advocates for urban and rural communities to address needed policy interventions for improving economic mobility.

The goal of coalition building and topical targeting is to inform policymakers about how changes to these policies would create better conditions to improve economic mobility. Charlotte's mobility stagnation is the result of decades of policies and business practices that have led to a widening income gap and segregation.

Leading on Opportunity is working with and creating coalitions to address policies that increase access, availability, and quality of child care through local, regional and statewide advocacy.

Across North Carolina, caregivers are unable to fully participate in the workforce:

- 200,000 NC parents cite lack of child care as the primary barrier to employment
- Current child care models are unsustainable
- Studies estimate the child care crisis costs North Carolina \$3.5 billion each year in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue

Leading on Opportunity has identified policy priorities and areas for action in early care and education:

- Increase funding for child care providers
- Improve family eligibility requirements (more access)
- Increase wages for child care workers
- Reduce barriers for expanding child care options

Leading on Opportunity has broadened the perception of advocacy to include grassroots organizations and businesses. Atrium Health, the Charlotte Business Alliance, Mecklenburg County, and the State of North Carolina are among the organizations that have shifted/changed policy after Leading on Opportunity advocacy interventions.

Our Current Approach to ECE Policy		
	Tactics	Examples
	Educate stakeholders about ECE policy priorities	Meetings and presentations with regional business alliances, existing coalitions, etc. Host panel discussions
	Build support for local, creative solutions	Identify zoning changes that could expand access and availability of child care
	Catalyze action for ECE legislation	Participate in panel discussions; Contact state legislators

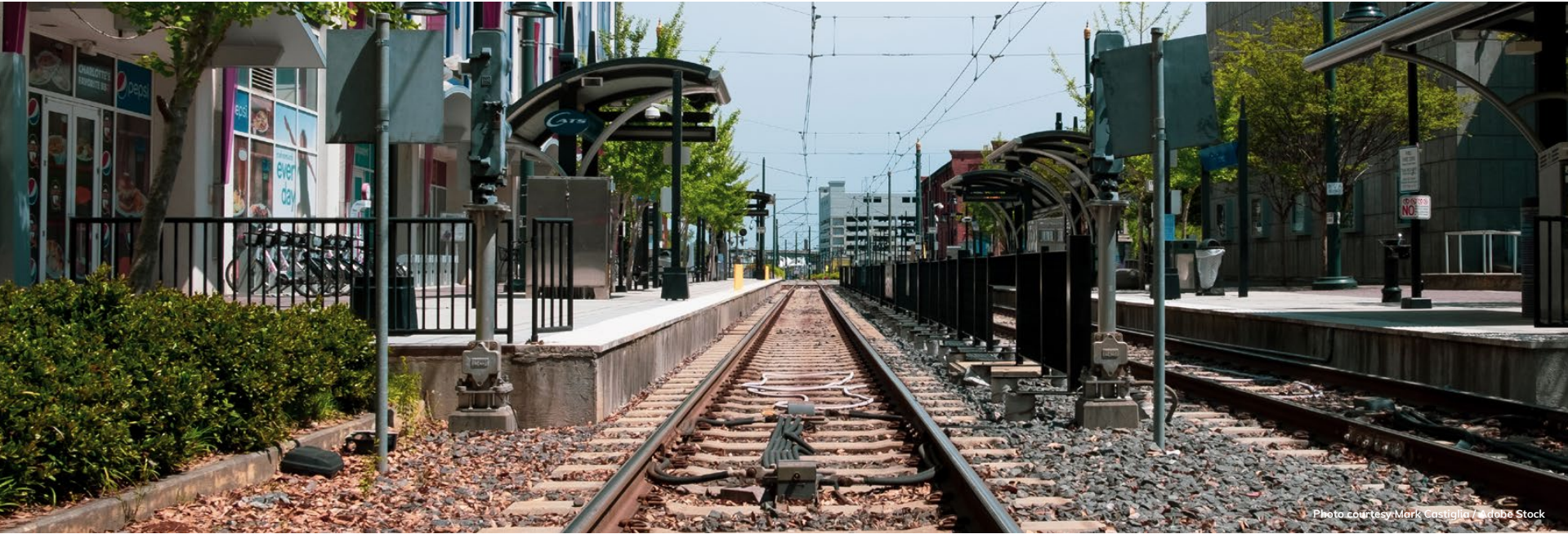
Opportunity Compass Origins

Charlotte was once 50 out of 50 in economic mobility, and has improved because of partnerships, economic connectedness, and navigation services. To continue improving local economic mobility, Charlotte needed the ability to track its progress year over year (rather than waiting up to 10 years for a national study). The city wanted to be able to gauge the short-term impact of programs and investments, and built the Opportunity Compass.

Launched in 2022, the Opportunity Compass measured 33 indicators of economic mobility across key areas of improvement: early care and education, college and career readiness, child and family stability, and the impact of segregation. Using publicly available data from 2015-19, the Compass establishes Charlotte-Mecklenburg's baseline for future progress.

Leading on Opportunity is the practical translation of big data, offering the community education and empowerment through data and expertise. Since 2023, Leading on Opportunity has hosted more than 50 hours of workshops with more than 100 nonprofits, and developed funder impact reports for Bank of America, Atrium Health, Ally Financial, and Mecklenburg County. Nonprofits can use data interpreted by Leading on Opportunity to inform their efficacy and strategy.

More than 100 English and Spanish-speaking Charlotte-area nonprofits have learned how to use the Compass to report impact, tell their story, and plan for the future.



Opportunity Compass 2.0
The Opportunity Compass organizes local economic mobility data that can be used by funders and nonprofits interested in aligning their work to common metrics.

Compass 2.0, expected to launch publicly in mid-late 2025, will display current nonprofit programs and financial investments that align with each of the local indicators, increasing the measurable indicators to 83. This information will help Charlotte-Mecklenburg to analyze its economic mobility efforts in new ways.

The updated Compass will be a valuable tool in tracking and measuring how Charlotte maintains that positive momentum. It will provide a shared language and accessible visualizations of the determinants of economic mobility to aid organizations and individuals in policymaking, fundraising, and community organizing. Economic mobility doesn't change overnight, and the Compass helps Leading on Opportunity focus the work and sustain commitment, by providing a centralized location for economic mobility data.

On Metrics and Measurements
When discussing economic mobility data, there tends to be a narrative that revolves around projects, goals and KPIs. The gold standard is often the “best metrics,” implying that if a city sets the “right metrics” everything will fall in place.

While individual metrics are somewhat helpful, Leading on Opportunity posited that metrics alone won't impact economic mobility, because change happens too slowly to be meaningfully tracked through general community statistics; the shorter the list of “best metrics” the less we understand the pervasive nature of systemic problems, and systems change organizations cannot control individual ecosystem metrics.

The challenge Leading on Opportunity is working to solve is showing:

Define
Ask what metrics really define economic mobility—what are the things that if we lean in on those areas we'd drive change?

Monitor
Look over time to see which of those metrics are moving in the right direction, and where do we need to lean in further?

Align
Our metrics are designed not primarily for accountability, but for alignment. Leading on Opportunity is seeking to use data to get NPOs, funders, and policymakers working from the same playbook toward the same goals.

Leading on Opportunity has found success by working within existing power structures to gradually bring leaders (and power structures) together in new ways. Leading on Opportunity excels at making sure that all power brokers—regardless of their hierarchy—are equipped with knowledge that enables them to be more effective in advocating for change and collaborating more effectively. Leading on Opportunity strives to equip all (grassroots, mid-level, CEO) in a way that enables them to be more effective together, while maintaining their separate positions of power.

Focused on understanding and integration within existing power structures, Leading on Opportunity builds trust and provides valuable insights/information—then, over time, leverages that to create more alignment and synergy on large, collective problems.



Thank You



Leading on Opportunity Funders, 2017-2026

Accenture LLP	The Center for Black Health & Equity	Duke Energy	Lowe's	Truist
Ally	CFLeads	James B. Duke/The Duke Endowment	The Leon Levine Foundation	TTX Company
American Endowment Foundation	City of Charlotte – Neighborhood Development	Educational Credit Management Corporation Foundation	Mecklenburg County	University of Pittsburgh
The Annie E. Casey Foundation	Comcast NBCUniversal	Equitable Foundation	Mecklenburg County Manager's Office	United Way of Greater Charlotte
Anonymous	Community Action Program Legal Services, Inc.	EY	Moore & Van Allen	Urban Institute
Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation	Community Foundation for a Greater Richmond	Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia	NEO Philanthropy	US Bank
Atrium Health	Community Link Programs of Traveler Aid Society, Inc.	Fidelity Foundation	New Venture Fund	Vanguard Charitable Endowment Program
Bank of America	Community Matters Insurance Partners of Charlotte	Foundation for the Carolinas	North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, Inc.	Wells Fargo Foundation
Bank of America Matching Gifts Program	Community Matters Insurance Partners of Charlotte	Foundation for Social Connection The Gambrell Foundation	North Carolina Healthcare Foundation, Inc.	Winer Family Foundation
Black Economic Alliance	Davidson College	J. P. Morgan Chase Foundation	Novant Health	Winston-Salem Foundation, Inc.
Camber Collective	Deloitte	John S. & James L. Knight Foundation	Queens University of Charlotte	Women's Impact Fund
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